Weekly Devotions for the Sabbath Hours

Vol. 1

Lionel Hartley

(Compiled by Wendy Abbott)

Weekly Devotions for the Sabbath Hours

Vol. 1

Lionel Hartley

(Compiled by Wendy Abbott)

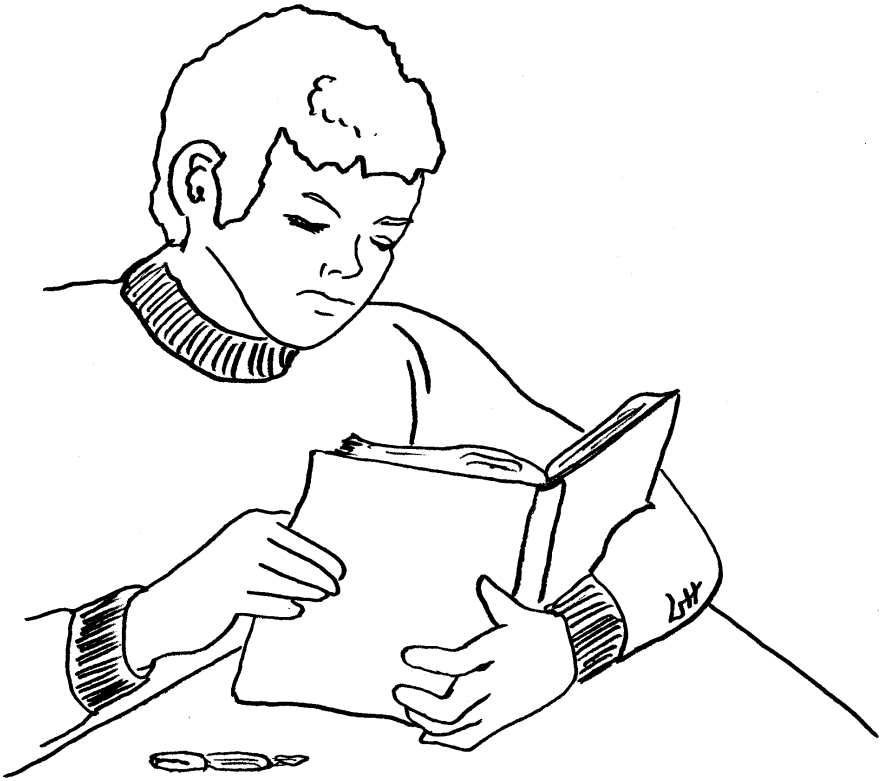
This Page Intentionally Blank

Contents

Foreword 3
Week 1 The Holy Bible is a Love Letter 5
Week 2 In Every Thing Give Thanks 15
Week 3 The Golden Rule 25
Week 4 Lavished Love 37
Week 5 The Mustard Seed 47
Week 6 The Providence of God 59
Week 7 "Why Me, God?" 69
Week 8 Enjoying the Ride 81
Week 9 The Hole in Your Sock 91
Week 10 Hope in the Night 101
Week 11 Amazing Grace 111
Week 12 Improving With Age
Week 13 For Our Good 141
Week 14 He Hideth My Soul 153
Week 15 Love Lifts from Lament 161
Week 16 The New Commandment 169
Week 17 A Check-up from the Neck Up 179
Week 18 The Richest Kid in Town 191
Week 19 What are You Looking At? 207
Week 20 Psalm 20 221

Week 21 Pleasing God 231
Week 22 Trees Planted by Streams of Water . 241
Week 23 When Moses Messed Up 251
Week 24 The Two Carpenters 263
Week 25 When God Seems Distant 277
Week 26 Where is God in my Pain 293
Week 27 How to React to Crisis 303
Week 28 Sweet Hour of Prayer 317
Week 29 Just as I Am, I Come 327
Week 30 Just As I Am, Without One Plea 339
Week 31 Biblical Joy 349
Week 32 When God Says No 359
Week 33 Hope 371
Week 34 Does Jesus Care? 387
Week 35 In God's Hands 401
Week 36 Trust in the Lord and Do Good 413
Week 37 The Best is Yet to Come 425
Week 38 Peace Like a River 437
Week 39 How Great Thou Art 449
Week 40 Crimond (Psalm 23) 459
Week 41 Breaking Bread 471
Week 42 He Will Carry You Through 483
Week 43 Have You Been Buried Alive? 493

Week 44 Hope and Heaven 503
Week 45 The Disease of Discouragement 515
Week 47 Spes Unica - Only Hope 535
Week 48 What a Friend We Have in Jesus 545
Week 45 What is Christmas all about? 555
Week 50 Christmas Providence 565
Week 51 Possible Peace 575
Week 52 Sleep in Heavenly Peace 585
About the Author and Illustrator 596



Weekly Devotions for the Sabbath Hours Volume 1
Lionel Hartley, PhD
Published under licence by the international division of
Central London Publishing, London, W1G 9TD
Copyright ©2005 Lionel Hartley
All rights reserved in all countries.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.
Typeset in Times
Illustrated by Lionel Hartley
Compiled and edited by Wendy Abbott, BLitt
wendy.abbott.16@facebook.com

Foreword

The author of these fifty-two weekly devotionals *(Dr Lionel Hartley)* says that the material was not intended for publication but for presentation as devotionals.

Illustrations were garnered from many sources throughout his over sixty years of pulpit ministry.

Interwoven are many personal experiences of the author, skillfully linked with Bible principles.

The topics were selected at random by the compiler from the hundreds of inspirational messages the author has presented over the years.

The majority of these are actual word-for-word transcripts of live presentations and are thus intended to be read aloud.

Each devotional will take between 10 and 15 minutes to read, and it is hoped that these readings will be followed by introspection if the reader is alone and discussion if the reading is shared.

Each devotional concludes with a prayer, however spontaneous prayer is also recommended prior to reading to allow the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts as you read.

All the illustrations in this book were hand-drawn by Lionel Hartley and the full-page illustrations may be printed as colouring-in pages to accompany the devotionals.

It is hoped that they will be a special addition to family worship or private devotions at the opening or closing of the Sabbath hours.

Resources to accompany these devotionals may be found in Dr Hartley's writings at www.lrhartley.com, hartleyonline.blogspot.com and on archive.org (under Lionel Hartley).

Wendy Abbott, BLitt
wendy.abbott.16@facebook.com
Authorised Compiler & Editor

Week 1
The Holy Bible is a Love Letter

It is almost fifty years ago now, but when my wife Rosemary and I were courting, due to a since-then Divinely-healed brain tumour I was forced to return to my country-of-origin and we continued our courtship by mail. Even though we wrote every day, in those days it took a whole week to receive each other's letters.

Each time a letter came, I freely confess that I read that letter more than once, not because I did not understand it at the first reading, nor because I expected to commend myself to the author by the frequent reading of her epistle. It was not with me a question of duty, but simply one of pleasure. I read it because I was and am still passionately devoted to the wonderful woman who wrote it.

To read the Holy Bible with that motive is to read it devotionally, and to the person who reads it in that spirit it is indeed a love letter.

Author James Hamilton wrote, "The Word of God will stand a thousand readings; and he who has gone over it most frequently is the surest of finding new wonders there".

Mortimer J. Adler, in *'How to Read a Book'*, has observed that the one time people read for all they are worth is when they are in love and are reading a love letter. They read every word three ways. They read between the lines and in the margins. They read the whole in terms of the parts, and each part in terms of the whole. They grow sensitive to context and ambiguity, to the order of phrases, and the weight of sentences. They may even take the punctuation into account. Then, if never before or after, they read carefully and in depth.

Let me tell you about another love letter.

In the early 1980s I was approached after church by an elderly church member affectionately known as Granny. She asked if I knew her grand-daughter [Out of courtesy, I'll call her Maggie - not her real name] who was now overseas but had been working as a nurse in the same hospital as me.

Yes, I did know her, quite well, in fact, as we

had worked together quite a number of times over an extended period of time. Granny explained that Maggie was working overseas at a mission hospital but had caused quite a deal of disruption by insisting that things be done her way.

Granny knew that although I had left the field of medicine, I was at that time running a counselling practice at the same hospital. And so she asked if I could write to her as a concerned friend and encourage her to change her approach. I agreed and said that I would send an immediate telegram with an appropriate Bible reference and follow it with a lengthy letter of explanation.

So I duly sent the telegram which read:
AMOS 3:1-3 LETTER FOLLOWING.

And I did follow it with a letter of explanation.

Amos 3:1-3 says: *Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, (2) You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. (3) Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*

Unfortunately the telegraph operator left off the first three letters of the name of the Bible book Amos. So the telegram that she received read,

S 3:1-3 LETTER FOLLOWING

Now Maggie was an intelligent girl and figured out that it was a Bible reference in the message and to expect a letter from me in the mail. But what book of the Bible starts with S? It couldn't be Psalms as that starts with a letter P. It couldn't be Samuel as that starts with a 1 or 2. It could only be Solomon's Song of Songs.

Embarrassingly, Song of Songs 3:1-3 reads: *By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. (2) I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. (3) The watchmen that go about the city found me: to whom I said, Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?*

And this was a message from Lionel and it said that a letter was following.

Well Maggie was sufficiently moved by this and so she wrote me a very passionate love letter

responding to her perception of what I had said. Our letters crossed in the mail and it was over a week later that I received another letter in which she profusely apologised for the misunderstanding.

Now you want me to tell you that we got married and lived happily ever after – well, no, we simply continued to love each other as a brother and sister in Christ. And so apologies were accepted and to her credit she took my counsel and ceased her inappropriate behaviour.

Let me promise you that God's love letter will never disappoint, because of who the author is…

I remember a certain lady in a counselling session who said, "I have a rather boring book at home called "Moral Responsibility" which was written by a man whose name and even initials are precisely the same as yours. Is that not an interesting coincidence?"

"I hardly think that is a coincidence," I replied."

"Why not?"

"For the simple reason that I wrote the book."

When I met her in the next session she told me that she sat up until the early morning hours to read

the book again, and when it was completed it seemed to her the most interesting book she had ever read. It wasn't boring at all. She found it fascinating.

The secret? She had simply discovered the author.

You will enjoy the greatest of all books, the Bible, God's Word, if you discover the Author. And one of the best ways to get to know an author is to read his book.

I am brave enough to suggest that the true author of the Holy Bible is none other than God Himself. About 40 people - shepherds, kings, prophets, and apostles wrote the Holy Bible between 1500 BC and 96 AD, and they claim to have been inspired by God. One said, ‘All the Bible was given by inspiration from God and is useful to teach us what is true and... how to live well’ 2 Timothy 3:16.

The Holy Bible came to us from God through four methods: inspiration, dictation, eyewitnesses and research.

‘Inspiration’ in terms of the Bible is more than that of an inspired piece of music or art. It’s God

speaking via dreams or visions, and prophets writing down the message in their own words. One said 'Prophecy never comes because some human decides it will happen, but holy people speak from God as they are moved by the Holy Spirit' 2 Peter 1:21. So the Holy Bible is God's will in human words.

Secondly, parts of the bible were written by dictation. Usually the writers wrote in their own words, however, sometimes they copied as God dictated. For example, Exodus 24:4 tells us that Moses wrote down everything the Lord had said.

Thirdly, eyewitness accounts. John wrote about Jesus' life, and in 1 John 1:1-3 John said, 'We saw it all happen - we're eye-witnesses… Now we're telling you what we've seen and heard so that you can share in this life with us.' John even tells us why he wrote these things. In John 20:30-31 he wrote, 'these things are written so that you will put your faith in Jesus the Son of God… If you have faith in Him, you will have true life.'

Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:16, 'When we told you about the power of Jesus and his soon return, we were not telling clever stories someone made up. We saw

with our own eyes how great he really was.'

Now they could they have remembered these things wrongly, however Jesus promised them in John 14:26, 'The (Holy) Spirit will teach you everything and remind you of what I said while I was with you.'

And fourthly parts of the Bible come to us through diligent research. Luke the physician was the only Bible author with a doctorate and he authored two books in the Bible: the Gospel of Luke and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. He wrote in Acts 1:1-4, 'Many people have tried to tell the story of what God has done among us. They wrote what they were told by people who had actually been there from the start and seen what happened. So I made a careful study of everything and decided to write and tell you exactly what happened… so that you can know for sure that what you heard is true.'

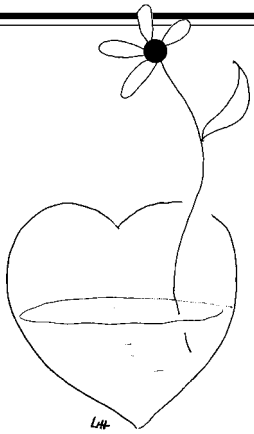
Unlike any other book ever written, the Holy Bible has the power to change lives for the better. If you let its author, the Holy Spirit, "guide you" (John 16: 13) as you study it, it can transform your life. Let it happen! You will never regret it. It is God's love letter to you.

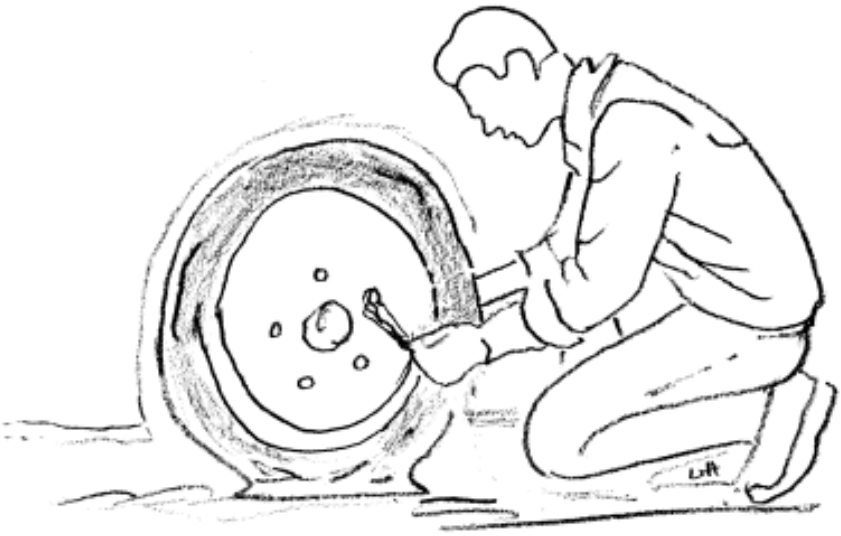
Prayer

Lord the most valuable book ever is available to us can be purchased for only a miniscule sum compared to the tremendous price paid for its penning, production, presentation and preservation.

Thank you for Your Word which speaks lovingly into stony hearts, especially ours.
May we have a desire to get to know you personally through its pages.

Amen





Week 2
In Every Thing Give Thanks

Tuesday 11th June 2019 was a day I'd rather forget. I will, however, for your sakes recall just a few of the events of that day that has caused me to make such a statement.

The day was scheduled to be a typically busy one. Firstly, my personal Prayer Journal Devotions where my key verse was Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose". Then breakfast, followed by our shared devotional with the theme that day of, "In Every Thing Give Thanks". The chosen verse was 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."

The day would continue with an appointment with the bank regarding my life insurance. For some unexplained reason, the Insurance Company, a subsidiary of the Bank, was of the impression that I

had died several years ago, and because no claim was made against the policy, premiums continued to be deducted from our joint bank account. If course, being deceased so long ago would invalidate any claim made against the policy in the event of a future (or second) death, so the policy I had been paying for all this time was useless. My appointment with the bank was to either request a refund of premiums paid since my supposed death and activate a new policy or reinstate the original policy seeing that I am still alive (I think).

After visiting the bank, I had planned to attend a management meeting at the church. Following that meeting, it was planned that I take my wife Rosemary to a seminar at the local library and then go back home to have lunch, then back to the library to collect Rosemary from her seminar and then take her back home before I went to collect our grandchildren from their respective schools for some baby-sitting through until the early evening. As I said, ‘a typically busy day’.

So I left early to the appointment with the bank and was less than half-way there when the car received a flat tyre. This necessitated a scary and hasty wheel-

change on a busy intersection with the hazard lights flashing. Frustratingly the spare tyre was soft – still hard enough to drive, but obviously needing more air. I stopped at a service station and re-filled the spare tyre with air before going on to my appointment.

Although I was late for the appointment with the bank, I was still able, after an hour or so, to resolve (in part) the insurance issues.

Not being used to using hazard lights, I accidentally left them on the whole time I was in the bank, so when I went to drive the car again, the battery was flat.

I requested an Automobile Association serviceman to attend, but was advised that I had not renewed my membership and it was evidently due 11 days prior. When I asked why I had not received any reminders they suggested that they had been sent by email, but when they checked the system, yes, it said to send email reminders, but it also said that there was no email address recorded, which is why none was sent. I renewed my membership on the spot – an expense I had not bargained for at the time, and I was told a serviceman would arrive in about an hour.

I telephoned the church to postpone my meeting there and then arranged for someone else to take Rosemary to her appointment while I waited for the Automobile Association serviceman to come to start my car.

To add to the frustration I was advised that the battery, now ten years old, would need replacing – a second bite into our budget.

Once the vehicle was mobile, I took the car to have the puncture repaired and was shown that the puncture occurred because of a crack in the rim that had torn the side-wall of the tyre and I would need both a new tyre and a replacement rim. A third bite into our budget.

I asked them to exchange the new tyre for the spare that I had put on while on the roadside. When I went to collect the vehicle they showed me that the spare wheel had been soft because it also had a similar hairline crack and it too would need both a new tyre and replacement rim. Yet another bite into to our budget.

We had used the morning devotional "In Every Thing Give Thanks" as an opportunity to give morning thanks to God for the day, even though we did not know what the next few hours would bring.

Now in the afternoon I pondered the mornings devotionals and remembered an old saying, "when you go with God to a new level, you get resistance from a old devil".

Satan hates the obedient and thankful soul. He hates it when a person decides to move from the fence of complacency and into the centre of God's will. A spiritual battle is raging around us and because of that, life can be hard. While giving genuine heart-felt thanks and saying 'yes' to God does bring blessings, it's still hard yard by yard; still a trial mile by mile.

If our desire for obedience is born merely out of duty, we may be quick to give up. Especially when everything in life seems to be going down side up. However, if our desire is born out of delight, out of a love relationship that burns deep in our souls, it won't be extinguished — no matter the cost.

One of the interesting love stories in the Bible

is that of Jacob and Rachel. Jacob's love for Rachel gave him purpose and perspective, which led to amazing persistence. He served Rachel's father for many years to earn the right to marry Rachel because he loved her that much. Genesis 29:20 says, "So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her"

Do you see what love can do for a person's view of his circumstances? When you are crazy in love with someone, you'll do anything for him or her — and do it with the highest level of sheer joy. I want to be so crazy in love with Jesus that not only do I serve Him, but I do it with absolute delight — even when life gets hard and messy and expensive.

I suggest that a sign of spiritual maturity is looking to God for purpose and perspective instead of comfort and convenience.

Asking God for comfort and convenience often leads to complacency. Looking to God for purpose and perspective forces me to learn crucial lessons in perseverance and maturity. Then I can understand the meaning of Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all

things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose". This does not mean that everything that happens to us will be good, but that God will work in and through every situation to bring good from it.

Here are 5 things to remember when everything seems to go wrong:

1. You are not alone

One of the first things that stands out for me in this verse is that it lets us know that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him". This reassures us that God is with us, in and through all things. He is there with us every moment of our lives.

Although we may have times in our lives when we experience being without the physical presence of someone; a friend, a spouse, a relative, etc. to talk to and share our burdens with, this verse comforts us by knowing that God is always there.

I am reminded that God is with me even in my most vulnerable moments, my happy moments, my sad moments, and my quiet moments and even on a frustrating Tuesday. He is there during all things.

2. He is working on our behalf

God is not only always there with us through all things, but the bible says he is working too. " In all things God 'works'", lets us know that he is both allowing and also making things happen. He is in control when we feel out of control. We have to trust that God is working on it, he is there and knows what we are dealing with.

3. He is in control of the "bad" things too

God not only works on our behalf during the good times to bless us with that new promotion, or new house, or something that we have prayed and asked him for, he is also in control of those bad situations that we have. God takes our tragedies and our trials and works them together into triumphs.

4. He has a purpose for us

We have been reminded so far that God is always with us, he is working on our behalf, and he is working for our good. But this passage also lets us know that he has a purpose for us too. So, all of the work he is doing is about purpose. Note that it does not say that it is for your purpose or my purpose, but "according to his purpose". So, God is working to ensure that his purpose for our life is fulfilled. What

we are trying to do and God's purpose for us may be completely different. This may be a reason why God has not given us some of the things we have prayed for. They may not be a part of his purpose for us.

And 5. He wants us to love him

God does have requirements for us so that he can work these things on our behalf. We have to "love him". God wants us to love him by showing that we have faith and trust him to direct our lives. He can only accomplish his purpose for our lives if we are willing. In order to do that, we have to love him, which means we must submit to him and allow him to take the lead in our lives.

God has provided his word to use as a road map, to navigate life. It is a source of knowledge, encouragement, inspiration, instruction and discipline. It, along with the Holy Spirit we have received, is the light to guide us on the path to his purpose for us. We would do well to regularly study it, meditate on it, and learn it, to stay armed and ready for the battles, the frustrations and the budget-benders that we will undoubtedly face.

May we all be inspired in every thing give

thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that we can still
praise you, not always for, but always
in all circumstances,
both the good and the bad.

If any, Lord, are in trying
circumstances right now, please
remind us all of the causes
to give You thanks.

Help us all to love you so much that
we can wholly trust you to bring good
out of every situation and encourage
us to focus not on the frustrations but
the future that you hold
in the palm of your hand for us.

Amen

Week 3
The Golden Rule

In 1863 in Charles Kingsley's fairy tale 'The Water Babies, there is a character named Mrs Do-As-You-Would-Be-Done-By and another, Mrs Be-Done-By-As-You-Did.

I'm sure you have heard of the Golden Rule

Please allow me to read Matthew 7:12 where Jesus said, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

Here we have a statement Jesus made while preaching the Sermon on the Mount that we are all familiar with. No doubt each of us has heard this principle for as long as we can remember. The Bible sceptic would argue that there is nothing special about our Lord's teaching in this regard. This is a principle that many follow. I will agree that many cultures may have adopted a similar teaching, but the principle that

Jesus reveals is unique. If you consider the similarity of other teachings, you also discover a profound difference.

The Tamil poet and philosopher Tiru-val-luvar around 200 BC wrote, “Do not do to others what you know has hurt yourself”

The ancient Hebrew rabbi Hillel the Elder used this rule as the most important message of the Torah for his teachings. Once, he was challenged by a gentile who asked to be converted under the condition that the Torah be explained to him in the brief time that he could stand on one foot. Hillel accepted him as a candidate for conversion to Judaism and briefed the man by saying, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.”

The Golden Rule in its prohibitive or negative form was a common principle in ancient Greek philosophy.

Thales around 500 BC wrote, “Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing.”

Sextus the Pythagorean around 300 BC wrote, “What you do not want to happen to you, do not do it yourself either.”

Around the same time Socrates wrote, “Do not do to others that which angers you when they do it to you.”

In Ancient Persia, the Pah-lavi Texts of Zoroastrianism record, “That nature alone is good which refrains from doing to another whatsoever is not good for itself.” and “Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others.”

Confucius, the Chinese sage, said, “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”

Hinduism in the Anu-sas-ana Parva tells us, “One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one’s own self”

Buddha in the 6th. Century admonished, “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”

Precept number nineteen in Scientology’s ‘The

Way to Happiness' is to "Try not to do things to others that you would not like them to do to you."

Additional books included in the Old Testament by some faiths include the books of Tobit where Tobit 4:15 reads, "Do to no one what you yourself dislike." And in Sirach 31:15 where we read, "Recognize that your neighbour feels as you do, and keep in mind your own dislikes."

Honourable though that they be, these statements are worlds away from what Jesus said. Their rules are negative and passive. Jesus' rule is positive and active.

In essence these wise men said, "Avoid doing to others what you do not want done to you." Jesus said, "Think of something good you wish someone would do for you, then you go ahead and do it for someone else."

Let's take a few moments to consider the fifteen principles of the Golden Rule.

There is the **strength principle:** When we help each other we achieve more together than one could

alone. Sticks in a bundle are not easily broken.

Then there's the **simplicity principle:** Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. This is a principle that even a child can comprehend. The simplicity does not detract from its significance, and yet it is often ignored. We live in an age of excess, indulgence, and greed. Few ever take the time to consider the needs or feelings of others. Our world is influenced by social status and most are willing to do whatever is necessary to get ahead, even at the expense of others.

Our world would be a much better place if all people were committed to living according to this simple principle. Jesus was very clear and precise with this command. This simple principle lies at the heart of humanity; it speaks of the love and care that should be present in all people.

Thirdly, the **significance principle**: Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. It is evident that Jesus desires each of us to practice what He has commanded. It isn't enough to know what the Bible

teaches; we must be willing to put those teachings into everyday practice.

When the “Golden Rule” is lived out in our lives, we are showing the love of God to others. We cannot please our Saviour if we are unwilling to love our neighbour.

Fourthly, the **sympathy principle:** One cannot look at this teaching of Jesus and miss the sympathy and empathy required. If we lack sympathy, we will never seek to treat others as we desire to be treated. We must have compassion for the needs of others. We must seek to understand their need and even feel their pain. We have all had occasions in life where we simply desired someone to be sympathetic, empathetic or compassionate to our need and to treat us as they would desire to be treated.

Fifthly, the **sharing principle:**. Many times in Scripture we find Jesus moved with compassion. It seems that when we see others as God sees them, our outlook toward other people will be different.

Sixthly, the **specifics principle:** Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.

This is not a command that is negative and passive; it is positive and active. It involves more than simply not doing wrong. It isn't limited to refraining from those things that we don't enjoy from others. Surely we wouldn't want to be mean or harmful to others, but that alone isn't enough.

It also involves more than just doing good because, seventhly, we have the **searching, seeking or seeing principle**: We ought to have a desire to live our lives in a godly manner and we know that we ought to do good at every opportunity. However, the command Jesus gives takes that a step further. This actually requires that we 'seek' to do good to others. It has the idea of looking, seeking, and searching for opportunities to do good for other people. It is going out of our way to be kind and compassionate.

Eight, the **span and scope principle:** Therefore ALL THINGS whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. This would have been easier to fulfil had Jesus commanded this behaviour in some things, in good things, or even in most things, but He commanded this in all things. He has not offered an optional or conditional requirement, but a continual command in every

circumstance we face.

Number nine, this becomes a **stabilizing principle**.

How often have we snapped back at someone who was rude or short with us? How often have we allowed bitterness to build up in our life and withheld compassion or help to those who have wronged us previously? How often have we ignored the needs of others simply because we had no desire to help in their situation? No doubt we are all guilty, and we have all failed in living according to God's will for our lives as some point or another.

Number ten, the **support principle:** Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. We must keep in mind that Jesus was often surrounded by sceptics. There were those who refused to receive Him as the Messiah. There were those who sought to discredit His teaching. His words alone should have been enough, but for those who were sceptical, He offers the support of the Scriptures. His teaching was not foreign to God's Word. In fact, this principle is found throughout the Bible.

Eleven is the **Scripture principle:** Jesus confirms this is given in the law and the prophets. That phrase was often used in reference to the Old Testament in its entirety. He reveals the whole of God's Word confirms this principle. The first four commandments deal with man's relationship to God and the other six refer to our dealings with our fellow men.

Twelve is the **sowing principle:** When we sow seeds of kindness, then we shall benefit from the fruits of kindness. I am sure that we are all familiar with this passage known as the Golden Rule, but are we living according to this simple and significant principle? Do we genuinely seek to treat others as we would have them treat us? Are we as loving and compassionate to others as we expect them to be to us?

This all hinges upon number thirteen, the **sustenance principle:** where our very survival depends upon our love for one another. We cannot treat others as we should, if we do not love them. God expects us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

The **supplication principle** is number fourteen. Do we need to seek the God's strength in order to treat others as we should? Maybe we need to seek the Lord to help us with an unforgiving spirit or confess our faults before Him.

And finally, number fifteen, the **success principle:** Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. This success lies in us actually applying the Golden Rule to our lives.

In 1971 the Alka-Seltzer company came up with a marketing slogan that equally applies to the Golden Rule and that slogan was "Try it, you'll like it".

I would like to take that catch-phrase a bit further, suggesting, "Try it, you'll like it and so will those you bless by it".

Yes, therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.

It is my prayer for all of us that we will be willing to give the Golden Rule a try.

Prayer

Lord, You have given us a positive
golden rule to live by that puts
others before ourselves.

Please help us to graciously live out
this rule in our lives.

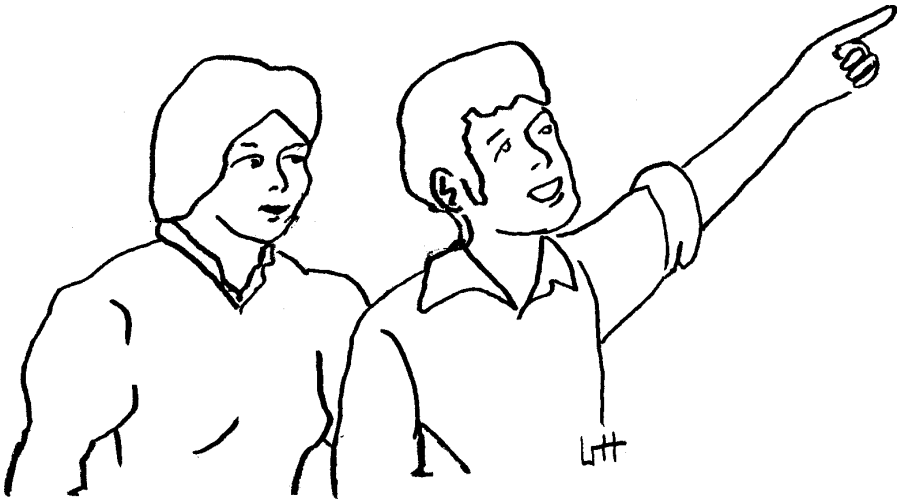
When we speak, may it be the way we
would like to be spoken to.

May we listen to others the way that
we would desire them to listen to us.

When we are able to do some good to
someone, may we consider what we
would like done to us
and then go ahead and do it for them.

Thank you Jesus
for helping us with this.

Amen.



Week 4
Lavished Love

Pastor Donald Gettys tells of an occasion when he was out hiking on the Appalachian Trail. This is what he said about that event: “We had gone ten or fifteen miles that day. I’ve probably walked about a hundred miles of the trip I suppose. Not much of the trail.

I was carrying a big backpack and they don’t have [take-away food stores] along the trail and their facilities, you know. So occasionally you have to step off the trail. I stepped off the trail and headed back to a remote area, and I spent some time noticing what God had made.

On a remote knoll well off the trail, I sat down to rest. I wondered how many people in the history of the world had ever been on that isolated spot. There beside me, my eyes feasted on a clump of tiny but extremely beautiful flowers. Was I the only human to see these intricate masterpieces of God?

Gettys goes on to say that he noticed many more far down the slope until they were too far for his eyes to see. Here were all these flowers growing, thousands of flowers. Maybe millions of them growing on all these mountain slopes. And there was no trail down there. There they would bloom and flourish and eventually die without benefiting any human being.

He thought, 'You know, God is so wasteful. This is such a waste. Why can't these flowers grow in my yard? Why can't these grow around our church? Why does God allow these flowers to grow here? I can't even get flowers to grow in my yard. Why is this? Is God wasteful?'"

Think about this for a moment. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Let's look at that word, "so." If I were a fisherman and I told you, "You know, I caught a fish and it was so big."

The word, "so" is a fantastic word. My dictionary says it's an intensifier to a very great extent or degree. "God so loved the world." Can you grasp

what that is trying to say? He loved us wonderfully, specially, fully and completely.

My wife Rosemary once teasingly asked how much I loved her, and I responded by saying, “More than yesterday and less than tomorrow”.

God is like that. Nay, rather, God is better than that!

Charles Spurgeon wrote, “In the very beginning, when this great universe lay in the mind of God, like unborn forests in the acorn-cup; God already loved his chosen creatures.”

God loves all of us. With His perfect love, is some of His love wasted on some of us? He lavishes His beautiful love on sinners, many or maybe most of whom will never respond to it or appreciate it.

I want you to notice a text in the Bible – it is 1 John 3. Here he writes about God and God’s love. 1 John 3:1 reads, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God”.

God lavishes His love on His people.

Definitions for 'lavish' include extravagant, munificent, to expend profusely, over generous, unstintingly, far more than adequate. That's wasteful, isn't it? Like mountain flowers whose sweet fragrance will never benefit any human being. There flowers just grow. Wasted, at least on people. I'm sure the wildlife and insects enjoy it. So God's great love is profusely lavished on everyone.

Notice what God does with His love as recorded in Romans 5:5-8 "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. … At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Now, presumably He wasted some of that, didn't He? If He died for every single human being, how many people are going to be saved? I do not even dare suggest a percentage. A lot of love seems wasted. Or is it wasted? I don't believe it is. Does God love bad people? Does God lavish His love on

bad people? Yes He does. When God tells us to love our enemies, then that surely means that He Himself loves those who hate Him.

We are told in Luke 6:27 “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,” That’s what God does every day. He does good to bad people. 1 John 4:7 Friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. In fact, John tells us that God is love.

Why does God love us so lavishly? Have you ever thought about that? It’s certainly not because we are so valuable. In fact, I would submit to you that we are only valuable because He loves us so much, and not vice versa. That’s why we have worth. We are valuable solely and precisely because God loves us so greatly.

How lavishly God gives to all to gratify our varied needs; like from the trees He makes to fall a rich hyperbole of seeds.

He gives more food than we can eat, more clothes than we can ever wear. More oxygen than we can breath, unseen, surrounds us in the air.

A grace we cannot understand, a depth of love

we can never know, He scatters all across the land. We feel it everywhere we go.

These blessings we cannot explain in any flowery platitude; God only asks that we maintain an effervescent gratitude.

A happy face should be our style, that everyone we meet may see the unsaid message of our smile: "This is what God has done for me."

That poem courtesy of retired pastor George Sheldon Stevens.

All we can do is to be grateful for that grand wonderful love.

Just as God pours out His beautiful flowers on the beautiful lush mountain meadows, He also pours them in the remote places, the rocky places of the world. You see flowers growing everywhere. Just so, He pours our His love on the bad places of the world. He pours them out on unresponsive hearts, even ours. Why? So that His love may grow there. Astonishingly, God pours out His exuberant love upon both saints and sinners.

I invite you to use your imagination to picture God writing you this letter:

"Dear (put your name here),

Yesterday, I saw you walking and laughing with your friends; I hoped that soon you'd want me to walk along with you, too. So, I painted you a sunset to close your day and whispered a cool breeze to refresh you. I waited – you never called but I just kept on loving you.

As I watched you fall asleep last night, I wanted to touch you. So I spilled moonlight onto your face. It trickled down your cheeks as so many tears have. But you didn't even think of Me; I wanted so much to comfort you and give you joy.

The next day I exploded a brilliant sunrise into glorious morning, just for you. But you woke up late and rushed off to work – you didn't even notice. So, My sky became cloudy and My tears were in the rain.

I love you, oh, if you'd only listen. I really do love you. I try to say it in the quiet of the green meadow and in the blue sky. The wind whispers My love throughout the treetops and spills it into the vibrant colours of all the flowers. I shout it to you in the thunder of the great waterfalls and compose love

songs the birds to sing for you.

I warm you with the clothing of My sunshine and perfume the air with nature's sweet scent. My love for you is deeper than any ocean and greater than any need in your heart. If you'd only realize how much I care.

My Dad sends His love. I want you to meet Him – He cares, too. Fathers are just that way. So, please; call on Me soon. No matter how long it takes, I'll wait – because I love you.

Signed: Your Loving Friend, Jesus.

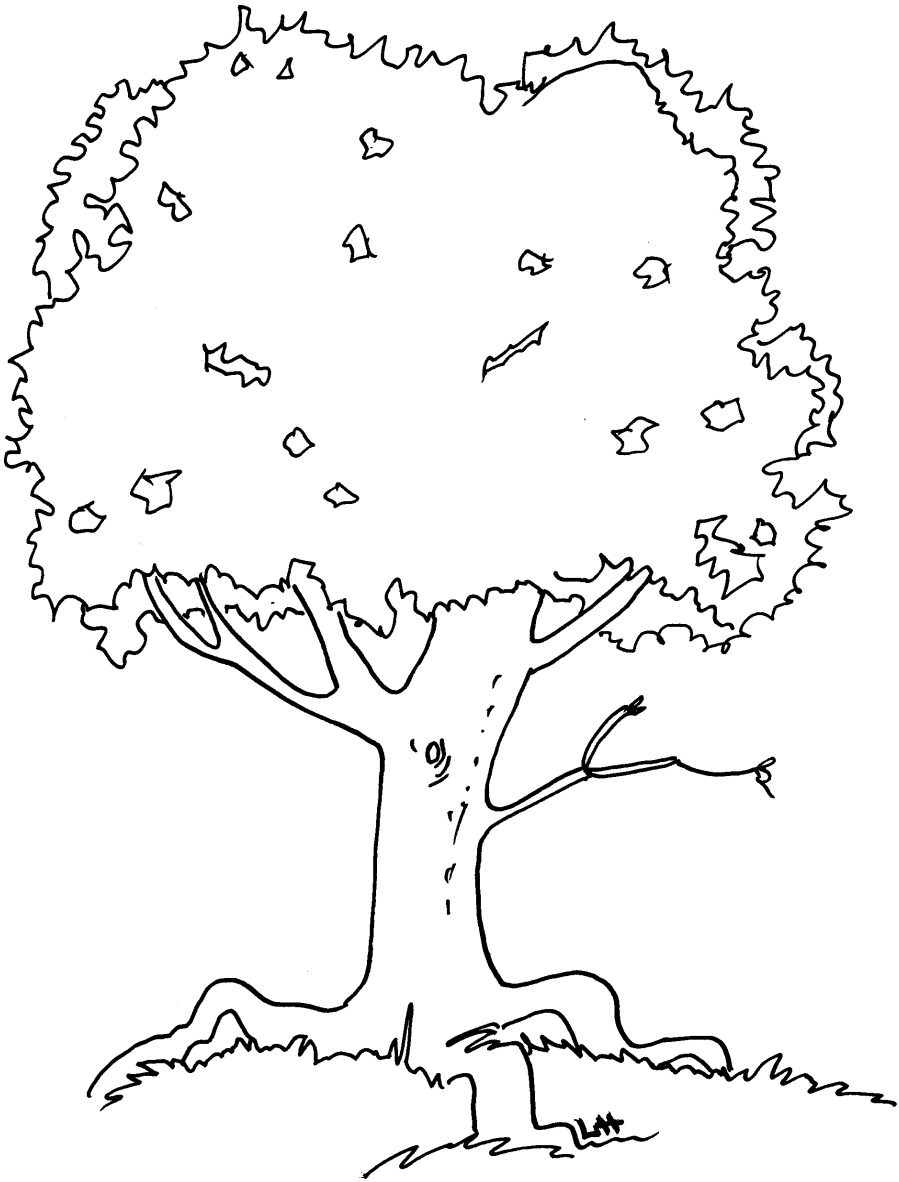
Prayer

Dear God, why did You put so many stars in place? There are billions more than we will ever see.

There is more air than we can possibly inhale. There are more beautiful sounds than we will ever hear. There is more colours in the spectrum than our eyes can ever see. There are more fragrant smells
than we will ever know.

Your grace is more than adequate to supply all our spiritual needs. Your forgiveness is more than sufficient to blot out our deepest and most secret sins. Your are more than able to save us to the uttermost. And it is in gratitude that we give you
our heart-felt thanks.

Amen."



Week 5
The Mustard Seed

Apart from the Great Barrier Reef, the most massive living thing on planet Earth is a giant sequoia tree found in central California's Sequoia National Park on the western slope of the Sierra Nevadas.

This tree, nicknamed General Sherman, stands at nearly 274.9 feet and has a girth of 102.6 feet near its base. It is estimated to weigh 2,756 tons. It is approximately 2,200 years old. The seeds of the giant sequoia are about the size of an oat flake, and according to the Guinness Book of World Records they weigh only 1/6,000 of an ounce

Many years ago, in the days when I wore a waistcoat and pocket watch, I was given the gift of a mustard seed in a miniature gold and glass case to attach to the fob chain of my watch. I remember a few observant people asking, "What's that?"

Telling them it was a mustard seed gave me an opportunity to relate a short parable of Jesus where

He used a mustard seed to explain the God's Kingdom. (Matthew records Jesus using the term "kingdom of heaven" as a euphemism for "kingdom of God" because religious Jews of that time didn't speak the name of God out of reverence and lest they break the Third Commandment against taking God's name in vain.)

Here is what Jesus spoke in a very short parable recorded in Matthew 13:31-32: "... 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.'" Similar words are found in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19.

This, of course was prophesied in Ezekiel 17:22-23 - "Thus saith the Lord God; I will also take of the highest branch of the high cedar, and will set it; I will crop off from the top of his young twigs a tender one, and will plant it upon an high mountain and eminent: 23 In the mountain of the height of Israel will I plant it: and it shall bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar: and under it shall dwell all fowl of every wing; in the shadow of the

branches thereof shall they dwell."

Matthew 13:31-32: "... 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.'"

The parable is short, and I'll try to make this message short too.

Jesus, using a mustard seed in His parable fits the brevity of His point. But the message, as usual, is quite astronomic and filled with profound insight. Let's examine what we can learn from the parable.

The context of the parable in Matthew 13 follows the longer parable of the sower and the seed and the parable of the tares sown by the enemy among the good seed of the field. The earlier parables in this chapter focus on the results of the sowing of the seed of the gospel or good news of the Kingdom through the preaching of the word. Some seed falls on rocky ground and doesn't sprout; some falls on other ground and grows for a little while but withers in the heat of

the day. Other seed falls on good ground and produces much fruit.

The parable of the tares shows the focused opposition of Satan to God's purpose in what Hebrews 2:10 calls "bringing many sons to glory". But God's plan will not be hindered. In the harvest, God will have the tares separated from the good grain. His purpose shall stand.

Now, with the parable of the mustard seed, Christ adds another dimension of understanding to His teaching about the Kingdom. In the present world, the Kingdom starts small, among the smallest of matters, but its power is strong and enduring, and it will grow to become something far greater.

Many of you will be familiar with the words of J. F. Carney who wrote, "Little drops of water, little grains of sand, / Make the mighty ocean and the pleasant land."

The happiness of life, too, is made up of minute fractions. The little soon-forgotten charities, of a kiss or smile, a kind look, a heartfelt compliment – countless infinitesimals of pleasurable and genial

feelings.

One day, I saw walking towards me in the street a dejected-looking elderly lady who looked as if she bore the weight of the world on her shoulders. As she passed me she caught my eye and I gave her a big warming smile. I continued walking, but she stopped, turned around and hastened after me. I don't remember her precise words but it was something like, "Thank you, Sonny, I so much needed that smile. You've made my day."

In the days of the Jewish return to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, God sent the prophet Zechariah to stir the people to action in their important task. They had stopped work on rebuilding the temple, the very purpose for their return from captivity in Babylon.

The small remnant group of Jews were a fraction of their former state before their captivity. Demoralized from the years in Babylon, their confidence in both their ability and God's presence among them was weak. They began the work of rebuilding, but had let opposition from the neighbouring peoples bring the project to a halt. God

sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to stir them to renew their effort.

In a vision of the temple, Zechariah saw lampstands, a bowl and olive trees. It was a vision God wanted conveyed to the leader of the Jewish community, Zerubbabel. The message was one of encouragement that God was with the fledgling community and that the people's work would be successful, yet they had to continue.

Zechariah 4:6-9 says, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts. 'Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain! And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of "Grace, grace to it!"'" … "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; His hands shall also finish it".

God does His work among men by the power of His Holy Spirit. The power of the returned Jewish exiles was very small at this moment. Opposition and criticism had hindered them. God was effectively saying to the leaders, You have begun the work; keep at it and you'll finish it. I am with you, but you have

to keep at it.

Then the prophet adds another thought from God: “For who has despised the day of small things? For these seven rejoice to see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. They are the eyes of the Lord, which scan to and fro throughout the whole earth” Zechariah 4:10.

The message to Zerubbabel and the people was clear: Don’t worry about your small numbers and your insignificant position.

This small outpost of Jews was completely at the mercy of the great Persian Empire and its king, Cyrus. But God had been the One to move Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. God was greater than the king of Persia. There was no need to fear the king or any other source of opposition. Though they were small, God was with them. DL Moody wrote, “Small numbers make no difference to God. There is nothing small if God is in it.”

At that time these Jews were the remnant of the covenant nation of Israel. Israel had a special purpose in the hand of God, and although the nation

had sinned and stumbled, God's purpose and plan were sure. At that moment it was critical to the purpose of God that the nation be replanted and endure. Prophecies concerning the birth, life and death of Jesus the Messiah had yet to be fulfilled. God's purpose would stand. Though it seemed small at the time, God was working.

F. Forrester Church wrote, "If angels came in packages, we'd almost always pick the wrong one. Even as the devil is evil disguised as good, angels are goodness disguised. They show up in foolscap, calico, and gingham, and brown paper bags. Jesus discovered the realm of God in a mustard seed, the smallest and least portentous of all seeds. Mustard seeds and angels have this in common. They are little epiphanies of the divine amidst the ordinary."

Here is a lesson for us. When Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is like a small mustard seed that would grow large, He was showing the power of God to do His work through whatever instrument He chooses. It will often be in a small way that He works, but that is to His glory.

The apostle Paul similarly wrote: "We have this

treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair" (2 Corinthians 4:7-8).

God gives the power of the Holy Spirit to work faith and righteousness in His chosen people. It is the mighty power by which He raised Jesus from the dead. That same power can work in us to produce fruit for the Kingdom of God. The power is great and significant, but it starts small, like a mustard seed.

This power of life and faith is available when people realize they don't have the real power of God inherent within them. They must receive it from God.

How about you and me? Are we at that point yet? The key to living by every word of God and facing the challenges of life with courage and confidence is having within us the Spirit of God, the down payment of eternal life, the life of the Kingdom to come.

Frankly, without that Holy Spirit power none of us can expect to see the Heavenly Kingdom of God. God's Spirit must be a part of our life now. Like

that mustard seed, that Spirit must be planted within us and begin to grow to produce spiritual growth.

God promises the power to turn from sin and to obey Him in all parts of life. We find the beginning mandate in God's plan in Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, where he spoke the convicting words that lead to life: "Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Do you wonder what it means to "repent"? This is not a word we hear often. It means to stop living the way that brings problems, heartache and tragedy and ends in broken lives that are hard to fix. To repent means to change destructive and addictive behaviour that not only damages our own life but that of others in our family who love and care for us.

To repent in a biblical sense means to look into the mirror of God's perfect law of liberty and ask if we are a hearer or a doer of the Word of God (James 1:22-25). It means to take an honest assessment of our life, even if we feel we are a Christian and know God, and compare that to the standard of

righteousness defined by God's law.

Does this help us to begin to make some sense of what may be missing in our present life? If you've been struggling as a God-fearing person and wonder if something is wrong with you, then take a lesson from this parable. God's Kingdom is like a grain of mustard seed. It has the smallest of beginnings, yet has the greatest of power and potential. Do not minimize the power of the Spirit of God!

Notice how Christ answered His disciples' confusion over their lack of spiritual power. They hadn't been able to overcome the dark power of the demonic world and came to Christ asking what they were doing wrong. His answer connects to our parable. "So Jesus said to them, 'Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain (or any obstacle blocking what needs to be done), "Move from here to there," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" Matthew 17:20-21.

Never underestimate the power of God's Spirit

to begin and to finish His perfect work in us. Christ is preparing places for His followers in His coming Kingdom. He is working within His followers now, a small body of believers (Luke 12:32)—but a body which will laterlook be visible and apparent when God's followers are transformed and Jesus returns.

Someone has wisely said, "The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago;
The next best time is today."

Prayer

Thank you, Lord that you take what is small and seemingly insignificant and make something mighty out of it.

We pray that you will take us today and make us fruitful for Your Kingdom's sake so that in our shade can be found a blessing to others.

Amen.

Week 6
The Providence of God

In the late 1800s Maltbie Babcock penned these words: Back of the loaf is the snowy flour, /And back of the flour the mill, /And back of the mill is the wheat and the shower, /And the sun and the Father's will.

This, I believe, is the blessing of providence, described in the dictionary as "A manifestation of God's foresightful care for His creatures".

The word "providence" occurs but once in the King James Version of our English Bible (Acts 24:2) and on that occasion it does not specifically refer to the providence of God. Yet, it is evident that the doctrine of God's providence fills the pages of God's Word.

Providence is the care of God in the preservation and government of the world through natural means. Providence has to do with God's care and control of the world through natural law.

God created heaven and earth. In Acts 14: 15 Paul told the people at Lystra to "...turn . . . to the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein." God also continues to sustain the creation with the Word of His power.

Hebrews 1:2-3 tell us that "God ... hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person and upholding all things by the word of his power. .."

The Apostle Peter declared, "But the heavens, and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store.. ." (2 Peter 3:7). God's continued preservation of the universe is a part of God's providence and takes place through the natural laws which he has established.

Allow me to share some thoughts on providence.

Firstly, the Bible clearly teaches the providence of God, which means his care and guardianship over his people. For example, Psalm 3

5 "I have laid me down and slept. I awaked: for the Lord sustained me".

Secondly, the Bible concept of providence is predicated upon God's omnipotence because God is able to override our lives and accomplish His purposes. Genesis 18:14 reads, "Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life.. ."

Thirdly, the Bible concept of providence presupposes that God has a special purpose in mind for each of us and his guidance of our affairs is designed to accomplish that purpose.

Fourthly, the Bible concept of providence holds that God can and will be served by overruling of human affairs.

Fifthly, God has acted, and will continue to act, within the confines of his natural law to work out his sovereign will. God providentially delivered the Jews in Esther's day, but he used a queen's obstinacy (Esther 1:11, 12); a king's sleepless night (chapter 6:1); Mordecai's overhearing a plot (chapter 2:21-23); and a wicked man's persistent arrogance (chapter

5:13).

Sixthly, we must take care in relating our personal experiences as the special leading of God because we might be mistaken.

Seven, we can be sure of special providence in the lives of Joseph, Daniel, etc., because there is divine interpretation explained in God's Word.

Eight, there are things that have happened in all our lives that appear providential, but, without a divine interpreter, the best we can do is say with Mordecai "who knoweth" (Esther 4:14), and with Paul "perhaps" (Philemon 15).

Nine, as the Bible teaches that God continually guides us (Isaiah 58:ll); that all things work together for our good (Romans 8:28); that afterwards he will receive us into glory (Psalm 73:24), why do we need to become anxious over the particulars?

Hebrews 13:5-6 contains the promise, "...For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me".

Through Moses to Joshua (and by implication to you and me) God says as recorded in Deuteronomy 31:6, "Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid.. .; for the Lord thy God, he it is that goeth with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee".

And finally, the providence of God operates in the shadows as well as the sunshine.

If I feel gratitude only when the scenes of life are desirable, I misunderstand and minimize the over-arching providence of the Almighty. I then need to take another look at the biblical and historical record and see the process at work.

For example, the mistreatment Joseph suffered from his brothers was wrong. As a matter of historical record it will always have been wrong for them to sell him into slavery. But what they intended for evil, God over-ruled for good (Genesis 50:20-21).

And that is just the point, God was as much with Joseph, and his providence was as active, on the dark days as on the bright ones. Joseph was but a youth when the heart-wrenching reverses of his life began. It is absolutely marvellous how they worked

to help produce the great man he became.

It is our trust in God, just as it was with Joseph, that makes the difficult circumstances in life bearable. It is faithful service despite trying circumstances that makes the "happy endings" possible. Job was not only more blessed after his sore trials than he had been before (Job 42:12-17), but his faith, gratitude and happiness must surely have been greater as well.

Daniel did not deserve to be a slave in Babylon. Nehemiah should have been a free man, not a cupbearer for a Persian monarch. But by providence it turns out they were exactly when and where they were most needed.

We have no way of knowing just how much we have been the beneficiaries of God's providence, for usually our view is too limited to see the whole picture.

Elizabeth Cheney wrote,

"Said a robin to a sparrow,
"I should really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush around and worry so."

Said the sparrow to the robin,
"Friend, I think that it must be
That they know no heavenly Father
Such as cares for you and me."

I read an old story of a slave who had won the respect and friendship of his master, in part because he had a optimistic view of God's providence. No matter what happened, faith in God and good cheer always radiated. The master and slave became close and the master determined to set him free.

They planned a distant adventure island together. But then the master had the breech of his rifle explode in his hand. It blew off his thumb. He was anguished physically and emotionally.

The slave said, in his usual manner, "It is good." It enraged the master. He not only did not set him free, but he put him to servile tasks. He deliberately left his close friend and companion behind and went on the adventure alone.

A disaster then struck. Cannibals captured him. They were in the very process of readying the fire to cook him when, suddenly, one of the cannibals

pointed to where his thumb should have been and, amidst great excitement, set him free. They had a superstition that a man without one of his thumbs was specially favoured and not to be eaten.

Returning home and feeling remorse for the way he had treated his slave-friend, he went directly to him, apologized for the way he had been punished, and then related his frightening experience.

"It is all right," his smiling friend exclaimed, "for it was good."

The master bristled a bit at what, to him, was irrational cheer. "Good? There you go again. How in the world could you say it was good?"

"Because," his friend replied, "Otherwise I would have been with you. I too would have been captured. And I am not missing a thumb."

Do not miss the point and imagine for even a moment that evil is ever good. Evil is never good - evil is always evil! The point is, do not underestimate the power and wisdom of the Almighty God, or his love and providential care for those who love and

serve him.

Our great need is for faith --the trust in God to always be thankful and faithful, and most particularly when it seems evildoers or adverse circumstances have frustrated our efforts the most.

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). "...I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee, So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (Hebrews 13:5-6).

In whatever circumstance you are in, may this be your experience today.

Prayer

May the Lord bless us, and keep us:
May the Lord make his face shine
upon us, and be gracious unto us:

May the Lord lift up his countenance
upon us, and give us peace. May we
have grace, mercy, and peace, from
God the Father, from His comforting
Spirit, and from
the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour.

And the promised providence,
protection, peace and provision, which
surpasses all understanding, shall keep
our hearts and minds
through Christ Jesus.

Amen

Week 7
"Why Me, God?"

I have much for which to be thankful. Sure I've had my share of troubles - diagnoses of terminal illnesses, more than once a victim of burglary, losing an uninsured house and business by fire, the loss of close loved ones, redundancy, injustice, unfairness, chronic pain. But yes, I have much for which to be thankful.

Some reading this today may be wondering if they can also feel this sense of gratitude.

When we have doubts and questions dominating our mind we may ask the question, "Why Me, God?".

Now, from the outset let me say that it is okay to ask, "Why?". Even Jesus Himself, while hanging on the cross, asked a 'why' question. The novelist Topsy Gift profoundly said, "Truth is hidden only to the masses who are not inquisitive".

Yes, it is okay to ask, "Why?".

And so we find ourselves asking the question, "Why Me, God?".

Many will find that no question is more paralysing and difficult to answer, than this one, "Why me, God?"

"Why me, God?" has a multitude of variations:

"God, why did you let me get sick? Did I do something wrong? What have I done to deserve this?"

"God, why did you let my relationship flounder? Am I a terrible person? Am I a failure?"

"God, why have I been unemployed for so long? Don't you know I need to provide for my family?"

"God, why did you let my business fail? Are you listening, Lord?"

"God, where are you when I need you? Are you really there? Do you care about me? Am I really so bad that you have forsaken me?

"Why God? Why me?"

These are the types of questions that almost every person asks themselves at some point in their lives. But what sets these questions apart, are that they are not just personal seeker questions - questions of lament, anguish, grief and pain - but questions that

are really theological in nature. They are theological questions because they lay exposed our understanding of ourselves, our understanding of God, and our understanding of life in general.

A liitle over six decades ago I had the misfortune of losing my sight, and for ten years I was completely blind in one eye and had only a tiny percentage of vision in the other. For one whose favourite pastime in those days was reading, this came as a tremendous blow. Even though I had some limited sight in what was referred to as 4/20 vision or sufficient to read with some difficulty, I was declared legally blind, although 10 years later most of my sight was miraculously resored (although this is a story for another time).

After spending frustrating days and sleepless nights wrestling with the question, "Why me?", I discovered that two slightly different variations of that question helped transform my laments into thanks. These two variations of the "why me" question have helped me for the last sixty years and I am about to share them with you now.

The first variation of the question - the most personally helpful for me - was this: "Why not me?"

In some way, when I asked the "why me" question, there was an assumption that suffering was not supposed to affect me, that it was not appropriate, neither was it fair.

The real question that I was asking God was, "God, why me, because this kind of thing is not supposed to happen to someone like me. Other people maybe, blatant sinners maybe, liars, cheats and murderers, but not me."

So the real question is, "Why not me?".

God has never promised that I would bypass suffering, that I would forever remain healthy, or that I would truly succeed in business, or succeed as a spouse or parent. In fact, Jesus repeatedly calls upon the disciples to count the cost of following him, to recognize that they will be hated by others, to bear crosses, and die to self.

Moreover, many others have lived far better lives than I have and have still experienced tremendous difficulty. Just ask Job, or Jesus, or the apostle Paul, or Corrie ten Boom, or Martin Luther King Jr. If such faithful servants of Christ could suffer

so profoundly, why not me?

By verbalising, or even thinking the question "why me?" betrays the fact that I had bought into a worldview that is based more on guesswork than gospel.

Part of the reason why hardship shocked me is because I had bought into the lie that in life, people get what they deserve: If I'm good I get rewarded; if I'm bad I get punished.

What I failed to see is that the grace that is through Christ tells me that everyone does not get what they deserve. God's bounty extends to those who don't deserve it. Matthew 5:45 says that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust".

As one well-known author has written, "Christ was treated as we deserve that we may be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His."

In truth, I am just as susceptible to the difficulties and hardships and grief that accompany human existence as is the next person. I'm no better, no more worthy of an easy road based on virtue or intelligence or character, or my identity as a follower of Christ.

But, more importantly, this also means that my hardships are in no way an indicator that God does not love me or that he has abandoned me. I realized that people who are deeply loved by God can suffer deeply as well - and that includes me. It includes my family.

The second question that I asked myself was even more transforming than the first: "Why me?" This might seem like the same question that I first posed, so allow me to explain what I mean.

When I experience hardship, I am often quick to raise an anguished voice to the heavens and cry out, "God, why me? Why, out of all people, have I been chosen to suffer in this way?" And when I fail to receive a satisfactory answer - or any response at all - I imagine that it can only mean that God does

not love me, or he doesn't exist, or maybe he doesn't care. In fact, many of us probably know people who have lost their faith in this exact manner.

Yet when something good happens to me, when I experience blessings and providence and protection, I am not so quick do the same thing, or at least not to the same degree.

I don't raise a shout to the heavens, "God, why me? Why, out of all people, have I been chosen to receive this blessing and all this goodness in my life?" Instead, I may give quiet praise to God as I wear a smile of smug self-satisfaction, certain that my own intelligence or goodness had something to do with the outcome.

I find this rather revealing, that when we are doing badly, we are quick to complain to God, to pin our misfortunes on him and his incomprehensible ways. We call this an Act of God. But when we are doing well, we are more quiet and reserved.

What an unfair contradiction, that God should be so commonly blamed for our hardship, and so anaemically praised for our blessings! By all rights,

if I am shaking my fists at the heavens, I should also be prepared to raise my hands in praise to them as well. This is only logical and fair.

James, the brother of Jesus wrote in James 1:17 as recorded in the English Standard Version, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above."

And so when life gets tough, I can now ask this same question but in a different way, asking what I have done to deserve the blessings of my life.

Let me tell you about Kelly. I don't know her last name, but I read a transcript of an interview with her that took place in the year 2000 on an American TV program called the Oprah Show. In that interview Kelly told viewers how she survived abandonment, a plane crash and leukaemia - all before she turned 12.

As a baby, Kelly was left by her parents on the side of a road in Vietnam. She had a short stay in a local orphanage, and then, in 1975, she was part of Operation Baby Life - a program that evacuated thousands of orphaned babies from Vietnam. Kelly was placed on a plane destined for the United States, but her journey did not go smoothly. The plane she

was on crashed, killing 150 passengers. Kelly told the viewers, "I really don't know why I was chosen to be one of those survivors. I feel incredibly lucky, and I feel like I've gotten a lot of second chances".

A couple in Seattle, a seaport city on the west coast of the United States, eventually adopted Kelly. But the obstacles did not stop there. At age 11, she was diagnosed with leukaemia. With fight and determination, Kelly overcame her disease and went on to become a healthy and successful adult. Kelly said, "These obstacles that had happened in my life gave me strength and fuelled my motivation to live and to succeed and to go on."

The Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:11-13 (as recorded in the New International Version) wrote, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through [God] who gives me strength.

I look at my lovely wife Rosemary, my three

grown children and my grandchildren and have no idea why God has seen fit to give me such a wonderful family. I have witnessed the love and care of friends and even strangers who stand by my side to encourage me and I marvel, knowing that I have done nothing to deserve such support. If I actually take the time to look for them I will find that these and many other blessings surround me on a daily basis.

I have done nothing to deserve these gifts, and yet here they are, richly piled at my feet. When I am focused on what I lack, I become all but blind to all that I possess. This focus is really robbing me of contentment.

As we give thanks to God and others, we inevitably come to the realization that we are undeservedly rich and bewilderingly blessed.

What I learned through this it that I needed a spirit of thanksgiving. I have learned that thanksgiving is not just an American holiday celebrated on fourth Thursday of November, but thanksgiving is a crucial spiritual discipline that we must cultivate daily.

I must take an inventory each day of what I

have instead of counting up all the things that I do not have. I need to meditate on what God has done in my life instead of what I am still waiting on him to do.

Our selfish sinful nature takes an open-ended question like "Why me?" but only asks it as a means to question God and to try to remind him of all that we lack in life.

But a spirit of thanksgiving stands as a safeguard against this tendency. An attitude of gratitude brings balance to our lives, reminding us to always look for blessings, even when we find ourselves in what we think is a barren wasteland, filled with pain and hurt and grief and loss.

So today, I encourage you to ask with me the question, "Why me, God?". Not as a means to complain about what you lack, but as a way to marvel at all that you possess. Think of all that you still have but have never earned.

Perhaps then you will realize as I did some sixty years ago that that although I thought I was a pauper, I was actually the richest person in the world.

Prayer

Thank you for all we have
and all that we are.

Thank you for the blessings our hurt
and questioning has blinded us to and
prevented us
from being truly thankful.

Forgive our ingratitude and fill us
with an attitude of gratitude
for what we still have.

Remind us constantly that you still
care about even us. Thank you Lord.

And now may the blessing of God
bless, sustain and fill us. In Jesus'
name, Amen.

Week 8
Enjoying the Ride

When I was a youngster we lived for many years in Christchurch New Zealand at the foot of the Cashmere Hills.

Up in the hills, about an hour's walk from our home, was a place called Glenelg Spur. We, however, called it the Sledging Place because between some caves on the hillside was a huge sloped and grassed area that was ideal and freely available for young children to slide down.

When we were first told of the place my two elder brothers and I took a large cardboard box to slide down on.

However we felt it wasn't very safe for my two younger sisters to join us - that is until I found the plans in a Popular Mechanics Magazine for a sturdy wooden sled with metal runners. I was about eight years old at the time.

We had a policy in our household that when each of us six children reached our sixth birthday we would receive a wooden tool chest that our father had made and it would be filled with real tools - hammer, screwdrivers, sandpaper, hand-drill, a saw, chisels, adjustable spanner, files, and a supply of used and labelled tobacco tins filled with nails, screws and small bolts. Over the following year our father would then spend time one-on-one with us teaching us how to safely use them, and he would supply us with additional materials, as we required them.

So I set to and built, sanded and shellacked a wooden sled with metal runners according to the plans. For the information of the younger generation, shellac was a glossy home-made varnish made by dissolving shellac flakes in clear methylated spirits. Shellac flakes were sold in round tins and had been manufactured from the resin trails left behind by swarms of female lac bugs in a variety of trees found only in India and Southern Asia.

Now because I owned the sled, I dictated a certain condition for letting my brothers and sisters ride on it, and that was that we all took turns carrying it up the hills rather than me having to carry it on my

own. This worked out well and we spent many hours during school holidays laughing and enjoying the fun of doing life together.

Even though I would rather sit and read a book, I did ride the sled a few times and, although not thrilling, I somehow enjoyed it. But I received the most pleasure seeing the pure fun, pure delight, pure joy, and pure happiness as my siblings laughed all the way down the hill with the wind in their faces, their hearts in their throats, and their gratitude-filled smiles and laughter as they sped past me.

They even continued to laugh while gleefully discussing whose turn it was next and while toting the sled back up to the top of the rise for the next ride down.

I know that I would have had no fun sledding down on my own, seeking that illusive thrill that really only comes through doing life with others. It was the shared experience that brought me the most joy and that is why, I believe, that God designed us for community, because when we live and love in community it brings joy to God.

Choosing to connect with God each day is a little like those childhood sled rides. It can take a bit of work to get ready to ride. You can even feel like you are working your way up a steep hill full of problems, work, and worldly concerns. For me spending hours sawing, shaping, sanding and shellacking timber took work, energy and determination.

However, once you get on board you find that the journey becomes pleasurable, possibly even a delight — especially if you invite others to join you for the ride.

Franklin P Jones wrote, "Love isn't what makes the world go 'round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile".

Soon you feel like you are flying along without having to expend any energy. It is then that you feel wind blowing in your face, joy filling up your heart, and love radiating from your very being. It is then that you feel absolute joy in sharing the ride with others, seeing their joy, witnessing their happiness, sharing in their laughter.

When you choose to connect with God daily, you will find yourself laughing more, smiling more, and singing more.

You will find yourself sharing more, giving more, and helping more. You will find yourself loving others, spreading joy, and living the way that God meant for you to live. You will find yourself realizing that God is love, that life is joy, and that we are all God's children.

If you choose to sincerely seek God, then each day of your life can become like a sled ride, where you become filled with God's love and joy. Hills will seem less steep, the ride will become smoother and one day you may even sense God sledding right along beside you, laughing and smiling all the way.

When one of my younger sisters rode the sled, my eldest brother rode it with her holding her firmly around the waist to help her feel secure. When we experience pain and hurt or even loneliness, we can ask Jesus as an elder brother to wrap His arms around us and help us to feel secure as we traverse life's ups and downs.

Now I want to touch on a very delicate question: In your spiritual experience are you actually enjoying the communal ride or are you just coming along for the ride?

To only be coming along for the ride suggests a detachment that is self-centred and hedonistic. To enjoy the ride suggests that although you receive pleasure, that pleasure is derived from sharing the joy and doing life in community.

For a short time during the 1980s I was asked to volunteer on the management board of a charitable but secular organization in Toronto, New South Wales. As I had on their behalf successfully tendered for a financial grant from the Federal Government for a full-time caseworker to work for the organization, I was asked by the board to be one of a three-person panel to interview prospective applicants.

Following the interviews, I remember one of the other panellists making a disturbing statement. She said, "I think we should narrow our list to only those who said that they were Christians". I say, disturbing, because I knew her well enough to know that she was implying that Christianity was to make

people look good and was nothing more than membership in a club that carries certain member benefits and perks.

I am reminded of a story that Charles Spurgeon once told of someone who offered his prince a great sum of money to have permission once or twice a day to come into his presence, and only say, 'God save your Majesty!'

The prince, wondering at this large offer for so small a favour, asked him, 'What advantage will this afford you?'

'Oh sire,' he said, 'this, though I have nothing else at your hands, will get me a name in the country for one who is a great favourite at court, and such an opinion will help me more than it costs me for the payment.'

If we are just going along with Christianity for the ride - that is to say for social status or personal benefits, then we are like the hypocrites spoken of by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He said of those practicing benevolence, "When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites

do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" Matthew 6:2.

And of those making a show of religion He said, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" Matthew 6:5.

Shakespeare wrote in 'The Merchant of Venice', Act III "There is no vice so simple but assumes some mark of virtue in its outward parts".

An egotistical army major was assigned to a new office on a military base and was eager to make a big impression on anyone who came within his presence. As his new office was being completed, the major heard a knock on the door. A private stood at the opened door, waiting for instructions.

The major picked up the phone and motioned for the private to step inside. He decided to show-off as he said, "Yes sir, Mr. President, I agree with the Joint Chiefs of Staff - it is an excellent idea. That is

also my opinion, and you call me any time, I'm glad I could help. Yes sir, and the Vice President is also right, and you give my best to your family as well. Thank you sir, and a good day to you too, Mr. President."

The major hung up the phone he turned to the Private and snapped, "What is it you want, private?" Confused and embarrassed, the private mumbled, "Uh, sir, I'm just here to hook up the phone."

But, the solution to the hypocritical attitude of just going along with Christianity - or any religion - just for the ride is to become personally acquainted with God and partake in His joy. We can then take to heart the words of Jesus who said, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full" John 15:11.

So hop on my sled. Come ride with me. Whiz down the green grass and whoop with glee as you experience the freedom that comes through knowing God. John 8:36 says that "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

You can have this freedom, freed from hypocrisy, sin and guilt, simply by trusting wholly

on Jesus.

I invite you to trust in Him today.

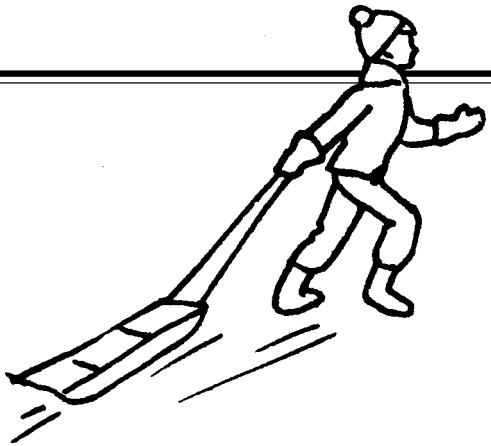
Prayer

Thank you Jesus
that you invite us to ride with you.

Help us to accept your invitation and
share in your joy.
May we be true and faithful to you.

And may the blessing of God the
Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy
Spirit be with us, now and forever.

Amen.



Week 9
The Hole in Your Sock

My mother once told me that when she and my dad were courting she had told him that when they were married she would happily mend his socks. Shortly after their wedding day he presented her with a bag of socks for mending, explaining that his mother had refused to mend them.

Wondering why, she opened the bag and there were an assortment of the remnants of what were perhaps once socks. Evidently, when my dad wore a hole in the heel he would simply turn the sock so the hole was at the side or the top rather than underneath, wearing in the process yet another hole. And then rotate it further until the sock became unusable.

To my mother's credit she also refused to mend these particular socks, insisting that if ever a sock had a hole she would happily darn it straight away before it became a woollen rag.

We are all too familiar with getting a hole in

our sock. For the ladies it may be a run or ladder in a stocking. A hole in a sock is common to children, youth, and adults. It's part of the journey of life along with the missing sock that gets sucked into that illusory black hole in the washing machine or clothes dryer, leaving behind an unwanted orphaned sock, forever abandoned.

Christine R. Wilson in the Christian Reader Magazine wrote the following embarrassing account: I stood dismayed in the kitchen of our newly acquired country home. I had accidentally submerged my left foot in a tray of fresh wall paint. A few minutes later, as I took off my comfortable, hole-in-the-toe painting sneakers, and noticed that only did I have a "country orange" toe, I also had a hole in the sock on that foot. I regretted that I hadn't brought along another pair of socks. I would have to sport a "Country Orange" big toe in my sandals when I picked up my four little sons from the babysitter's.

When I arrived at her home, she says, the sitter suggested that since the infants were still napping, I do a little shopping and stop back for them later. I don't often get an offer like that, so I wasted no time in heading for the department store.

On the way, Christine remembered her toe. She says that it would have been embarrassing to explain her clumsiness, her orange toe, the hole, and her toeless sneaker. At the store, however, she quickly made her way to the house-wares department. There she found that all things really do "work together for good." She was able to perfectly match the new kitchen dish cloths and towels to her Country Orange toe.

Often the first hole in a sock appears at the big toe. It's an annoying characteristic of socks that holes usually appear at the most unfortunate or embarrassing times. Visit a friend and remove your shoes to enter his/her house and somehow your toe seems to know that now is a great time to break free. Whether at school gym class, or after a hard day at work, our socks get worn and soon a hole appears. We are then reminded that it is time mend the sock or to buy a new pair or maybe a whole package of new socks.

At least we can generally mend the hole in a sock if it is not too far gone. But what do we do and what happens to us when we get a hole worn in our spirit? Do we go out and purchase a new spirit? Can

we mend it with our sewing kit? Whatever we do, the holes continue to appear.

Often we look at external forces that are causing our spirit to get worn down when, perhaps, it might be more beneficial to look at how our own spirit might be causing the holes.

Take a hearty look at your "spiritual feet." Take some time to wiggle your toes in the sand of God's love and Christ's salvation. Make sure that what you stand on will support you and not wear you down or tear a hole.

How does a spirit get worn down?

Sometimes we create our own holes by carelessly thinking only of ourselves.

C. H. Spurgeon wrote, "Sages of old contended that no sin was ever committed whose consequences rested on the head of the sinner alone; that no man could do ill and his fellows not suffer. They illustrate it thus: A vessel sailing from Joppa carried a passenger who, beneath his berth, cut a hole through the ship's side. When the men of the watch expostulated with

him, “What doest thou, O miserable man?” the offender calmly replied: “What matters it to you? The hole I have made lies under my own berth!”

Many parts of our lives drain us when they could be filling us up.

Every time we make a commitment, some of our free time is going to vanish. And if we wear too many hats, we will end up simply trying to get by.

Often it is not the bad things that wear holes in our soul, but doing too many good things instead of focusing on the best. We need to recognize that some things we do have greater significance than others.

Are there any activities we could do without? What activities are using a lot of time and are not very productive in fulfilling God’s will for our life? These activities are wearing holes in our spiritual socks.

We can replace our spiritual socks by regaining focus. We can repair them by losing what is simply time consuming. When we walk closely with God, He will make sure that our spiritual socks are always

in good repair.

What things have we allowed to wear us down spiritually that we need to remove from our life?

What holes have been left in our soul that need to be mended?

What can be done to help us regain our spiritual focus?

How can we return to our Christian walk, to discipleship in our life?

Romans 12:1-2 has a good answer: I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. 2) And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Furthermore, we can look to the cross to mend our soul. Actually, the best place to look in mending the holes in our spirit is to the cross. At the cross Jesus

became very well acquainted with holes:

A crown of thorns was placed upon his head, the sharp thorns puncturing holes in his scalp and brow.

There were holes in his hands and feet where the soldiers nailed him to the cross.

A hole in his side spewed blood and water when the soldier speared him.

But it was the hole in his heart that was the biggest – a heart broken by the sins of me and you. It was the reason He came to us, to mend the hole created by sin. Jesus died on that cross to mend our soul and spirit wounded by sin.

But that wasn't the last hole that Christ faced that would change everything.

They took his body down from the cross and it was placed in a borrowed hole, a tomb, by Joseph of Arimathea. Three days later Jesus left the hole and was alive. And with the conquering of the grave He proved that there was no hole too big, too deep, too

painful, too dark, too impossible to overcome, that God cannot mend.

So look to the cross. Look to Jesus, for the mending of our soul. Look to Him for His priorities for our lives. Not only will we find healing and mending, but also renewal. We'll be able to move from a life of holes and a worn-out spirit to a holy life wholly filled with his joy and strength for each new day.

The issue is not our feet but the holes. The Apostle Paul in Romans 10:15, quotes from Isaiah 52:7 when he says, "… How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things."

If someone mends your socks for you, you would, hopefully, say 'thank you'.

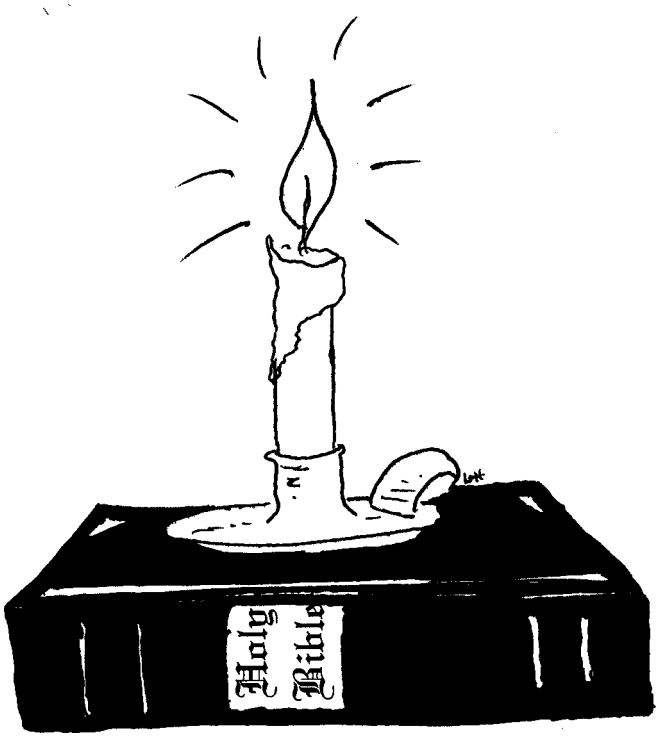
1 Timothy 1:12-17 contains a prayer of thanks for spiritual holes mended and this is our prayer for today.

Prayer

"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.

Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen."


Holy Bible

Week 10
Hope in the Night

On November 14,1991, a fire broke out in the laundry of our home in Morisset, New South Wales. Our home was located within the structure of a one-hundred foot long aluminium-clad building.

Although the local fire brigade did their best, within 30 minutes the fire had completely destroyed our uninsured home, a television recording studio, a counselling clinic and a first-aid kit manufacturing plant. In the entire complex only one pane of glass remained intact. On this sooty window, I wrote with my finger in mirror-writing so that those passing by could read from the outside the words, "God still cares."

I was prompted to do this for two reasons: one because I truly believed it and wanted to share that hope with others and secondly because of a story I had read by the Baptist pastor, James DeLoach. He wrote, 'I am not a connoisseur of great art, but from

time to time a painting or picture will really speak a clear, strong message to me.

Some time ago I saw a picture of an old burned-out mountain shack. All that remained was the chimney. ..the charred debris of what had been that family's sole possession. In front of this destroyed home stood an old grandfather-looking man dressed only in his underclothes with a small boy clutching a pair of patched overalls. It was evident that the child was crying.

Beneath the picture were the words that the artist felt the old man was speaking to the boy. They were simple words, yet they presented a profound theology and philosophy of life. Those words were, "Hush child, God ain't dead!"' that vivid picture of that burned-out mountain shack, that old man, the weeping child, and those words "God ain't dead" are not a reminder of the despair of life but a reminder of hope! We all need reminders that there is I hope in this world.'

In the midst of all of life's troubles and failures, we need mental pictures to remind us that all is not lost as long as God is alive and in control of His world.

The Bible describes what hope means, and says what it is there for. God's followers hope for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven. Or, said another way, the Christian hopes for the fruition of what has already begun, the hll arrival of God's Kingdom. We pin our hopes on the God of that Kingdom.

It is often said how we all need hope to survive, how hope is what dreams feed on, how hope is what gets us past the tough times when life is at its worst.

So some people make puffy statements about hope, or create false hope or even deceptive hopes, just to keep going. Lurking behind the manufacturing of hope is the soul-chilling suspicion, and occasionally a full-scale belief, that made-up hope is the only kind there is.

Or, the belief that if we just hope hard enough, or if large enough numbers of us hope together, that it will act like magic on our lives, and hope will somehow just 'become' real. But if you think about it, you'll realize that such hoping is an empty shell of a game and a spiritual charade, a supposedly 'good lie' which, like all so-called 'good lies', ends so cruelly.

Hoping in hope itself is like believing in faith but not practicing it - a circle that goes nowhere and ultimately does nothing.

This manufactured hope was described by Bernard M. Baruch, who wrote, 'A man sentenced to death obtained a reprieve by assuring the king he would teach his majesty's horse to fly within the year on the condition that if he didn't succeed, he could be put to death at the end of the year.

"Within a year," the man explained later, "the king may die, or I may die, or the horse may die.

Furthermore, in a year, who knows? Maybe the horse will learn to fly.'"

"But", an unbeliever might say, "don't you and I make up hope too? Isn't all this talk about God just something we made up to explain what we couldn't explain? Didn't we humans create 'God' to manufacture for ourselves a hope beyond ourselves?" I can't prove God to you, not through logical deduction or quantum physics.

I can't take you back to 2500 years ago so you

could meet Jeremiah who recorded God as saying, "For I know the thoughts I think towards you - thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you hope", nor 3000 years ago to David, and show you what God did or didn't do.

I can't transport you to the Galilee of 2000 years ago and have you speak to Jesus of Nazareth or to Paul of Tarsus. I can't even claim I know what the next chapter of human life is.

I can, however, testify to my own experiences, about how my life draws its strength from what is beyond me and very much other than me. I can testify that life pretty well matches what the Bible says life is like.

I can share with you how the Jesus' kind of God is the only kind that makes sense.

I can say that what I believe is not something I made up, but is rather something that has successfully sustained the hearts of millions over the course of two millennia, in spite of the evil work of those who abuse in this God's name.

I can even speak of a loving relationship with this God, an intimate back-and-forth exchange of an admittedly strange sort, which guides my life, or at least as far as my mulish mind lets it.

I didn't 'manufacture' any part of this; it is a response to the reality that I live in.

This gives me cause for a very strong hope, for myself and for the species I belong to, and even the planet I live on.

I believe that it is a much firmer basis for hope than most people base their lives on.

I hope, of course, that you too can discover the God that I hope in.

During the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century, German pastor Paul Gerhardt and his family were forced to flee from their home.

One night as they stayed in a small village inn, homeless and afraid, his wife broke down and cried openly in despair.

To comfort her, Gerhardt reminded her of Scripture promises about God's provision and keeping. Then, going out to the garden to be alone, he too broke down and wept. He felt he had come to his darkest hour.

Soon afterward, Gerhardt felt the burden lifted and sensed anew the Lord's presence.

Taking his pen, he wrote a hymn that has brought comfort to many. "Give to the winds thy fears; hope, and be undismayed; God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears; God shall lift up thy head. Through waves and clouds and storms He gently clears the way.

Wait thou His time, so shall the night soon end in joyous day."

Proverbs 13:12 tells us that when hope is postponed it makes the heart sick.

Please, don't postpone grasping the hope that is available though the graciousness of God.

G K Chesterton said that "Hope means hoping

when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all. . . As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude; it is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength."

Job 35: 10 describes hope as a gift from a God who 'gives songs in the night'.

It is often in our darkest times that God makes His presence known most clearly.

He uses our sufferings and troubles to show us that He is our only source of strength.

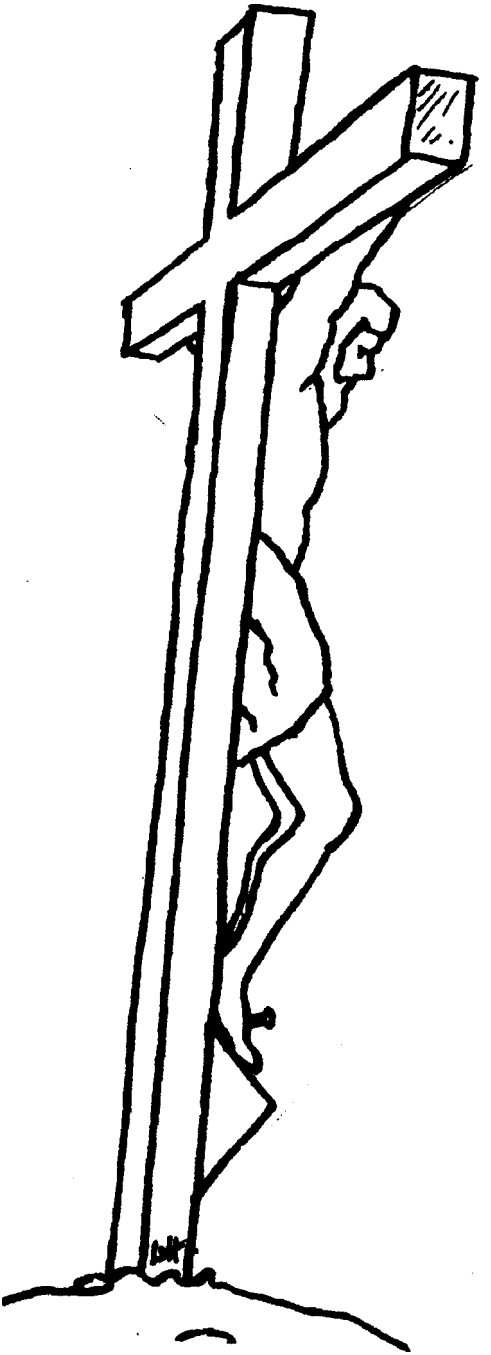
And when we see this truth, like Pastor Gerhardt, we receive new hope.

Are you facing a great trial? Are you in pain? Are you fearful for the future? Are you lonely? Take heart.

Put yourself in God's hands. Claim His promise. Wait for His timing. He will give you a "song in the night.

Prayer

Gracious God, You are a god of hope who gives us hope.
Please, today, in our despair, our pain, our fears and tears, give to us the hope that we long for.
No matter how gloomy our nights you can give us joy in the morning.
Thank you, God, for this gracious gift, the gift of a hope and a future.
Thank you that Your hope is real, genuine, and not made up.
Thank you that you desire the very best for us even though in our worry and pain we find this hard to see.
May hope be the little candle in the darkness.
May hope be the touch of a hand from a friend, or a caring nurse or physician.
May hope be a glimpse of something beyond these walls.
Fill us now with this hope, we pray in Jesus' name, Amen



Week 11
Amazing Grace

When you hear the word grace, what comes to mind? My mother's name was Grace. And she was filled with grace.

The prayer that we, through habit or gratitude, pray at mealtime, we call grace.

As a verb, the dictionary may tell us that it means to bring honour or credit to someone or something by one's attendance or participation.

Such as by saying that "He is one of the best players ever to grace the game"

As a noun, it may mean smoothness and elegance of movement.

We could say that he moved through the water with effortless grace or that she has the grace of a ballerina.

It may mean courteous good will. We may say that a certain person had the good grace to apologize afterwards.

Or it could mean the free and unmerited favour of God, as demonstrated in the salvation of sinners and the giving of blessings.

A good definition is by author Joseph Cooke who wrote, "Grace is nothing more nor less than the face that love wears when it meets imperfection, weakness, failure, [and] sin."

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed.

The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be,

as long as life endures.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
‘tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

When we’ve been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun,
we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
than when we first begun.

The hymn Amazing Grace was written by an Englishman, John Newton, and first published in 1779. It made its way to the USA, where it started being sung to an American folk tune. Eventually it made its way to the Great South Land and it has become one of the most popular hymns both here and abroad. But more amazing than how popular this hymn has become, is the subject that it speaks about: God's amazing grace- -his undeserved love and mercy for us unworthy sinners. As we look at the hymn, "Amazing Grace," and its basis in God's word, and at God's gracious work in the life of its writer, may this lead us to appreciate more deeply the amazing grace of God.

According to the book "Christian Worship Handbook", we read that John Newton was a man who experienced very deeply how needful, how wonderful, and how undeserved God's grace is. Newton's mother took him to church and taught him to read Scripture.

But she died when he was seven. As Newton grew up, he turned away from what his mother taught him, and became a complete unbeliever- he recalled often speaking blasphemies against God- and he and gave himself over to fulfilling the sinful desires of his flesh.

As a sailor, he was employed on ships that carried slaves from Africa. The life he was living brought him into some miserable situations.

But God preserved his life, and in 1748, when he was 23, while serving on the ship, "Greyhound", he started reading a book called, "The Imitation of Christ" by Thomas a'Kempis.

Then came a night when the ship was caught in a terrible storm, and started taking on water.

Newton feared he would soon die. He thought back on his life. At first he thought he could have no hope of God's forgiveness, but finally he clung to Scriptures that taught God's grace toward sinners, and cried out to the Lord in prayer.

Newton would later look back on this as the hour he first believed. In the next year there came a time when Newton slid back into the kind of sinful life he had lived before, but when God let a severe fever strike him, he came to repentance, and from then on he kept growing in faith and Christian living. In 1750 he was married.

He eventually got out of his job as captain of a slave ship and got a job as a customs officer in Liverpool. He spent much time attending religious services and meetings and studying the Scriptures. In 1764 he was ordained in the Church of England as curate of a congregation in the town of Olney.

While serving there, he wrote many hymns, including "Amazing Grace". In 1779 he became Rector of St. Mary's, Woolnoth, in London.

Newton became widely known and loved as a

preacher and leader of the evangelical movement. He served at St. Mary's until his death in 1807. On his grave marker is this inscription, which he composed: *"John Newton, … once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."*

Now let's look at Newton's hymn, "Amazing Grace." It first appeared with the title: "Faith's Review and Expectation," and was based on 1 Chronicles 17:16-17.

Those verses describe how David reacted after God gave him the promise of the Saviour to come from his family line: Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and he said, "Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And if this were not enough in your sight, O God, you have spoken about the future of your servant. You have looked on me as if I were the most exalted of men, O LORD God."

Like David's words, "Who am I…that you have brought me this far?" Newton's hymn starts by looking

back at the grace God had already shown him, when he had no reason to expect it:

> Amazing grace- how sweet the sound-
> That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost but now am found,
> Was blind but now I see.
> 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear;
> And grace my fears relieved.
> How precious did that grace appear;
> the hour I first believed!

Newton knew he was a sinful wretch, who deserved God's anger and damnation, not anything good from God. But instead, God was gracious to him and saved him!

Jesus took a lost sinner and found him, just as he described in Luke 19:10, "The Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost." Jesus took a man who was blinded in unbelief, and opened his eyes to know his Saviour and God's mercy.

That's how Jesus described it in John 9:39 when a man whom he had healed of physical blindness showed he had also had his eyes opened spiritually

by confessing faith in Jesus. He said: "… I have come into this world, so that the blind will see…"

Has God's grace done the same thing for you and me? Yes it has. You may or may not remember times in your life when you were living in such open rebellion against God as Newton was before his conversion, or when you were still blind to God's mercy and forgiveness in Christ.

Maybe you believe you are that way now. But listen to how the Apostle Paul describes all of us, as we were by nature, before God brought us to faith in Christ, in Ephesians 2:3. "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."

If it weren't for God's grace, that's where all of us would still be-- following the desires of the sinful heart we inherited from fallen Adam, under God's anger and bound for eternal separation from God.

But God has mercy on us, and brought to us the possibility of faith in Christ and God's forgiveness if we choose to say 'Yes' to Him. This includes me

and you, my friend. Right now God wants to be a vital part of our lives so that we can taste his blessings for ourselves.

Speaking of God's grace to "a wretch like me," some hearing my voice today may be able to think of times in our life since we were first brought to faith in Christ, when we turned our back on God for a while. God could have said, "That's it," and cut us off from him forever. But instead he had mercy on us and brought us to repentance. Amazing grace!

In the next two verses of his hymn, Newton reminds us what God's grace is doing for us right now, and will do for the rest of our lives on this earth.

A verse found in many hymnals says:
The Lord has promised good to me;
His word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

As a reminder of the good that God has promised in his word to those who believe in him, for as long as this life endures, and how he will be a shield that protects you, listen to these words from

Hebrews 13:5-6: "God has said, `Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, "The LORD is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Another verse has us look back on how God has preserved us, and look forward to how he will keep on doing this till our days on earth are done.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come; /
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

Think of the "dangers, toils and snares" God has already brought you through — not only dangers to your body, but in your spiritual journey or lack of it. It was his grace that did so.

And you can trust him to keep on bringing you through forever. You can say with the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 4:18, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom."

And when he has done that, then what can you

look forward to? Newton's hymn, "Amazing Grace." originally had two more verses describing the life with Christ we will enjoy when Jesus comes the second time.

> Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
> and mortal life shall cease;
> I shall possess, within the veil (vail?)
> a life of joy and peace.
>
> The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
> The sun forbear to shine;
> But God, who call'd me here below
> Will be forever mine.

Instead of those two verses, a different verse is often used as the traditional last verse of "Amazing Grace". We don't know who wrote it; it was first used as a closing verse for another hymn: "Jerusalem, My Happy Home".

This verse gets across some of the glory we will enjoy in heaven-- glory Jesus described in Matthew 13:43 by saying, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

And this verse gets across in a neat way what it means for us that then, as the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, "We will be with the Lord forever."

Read that verse:
When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.

There will be no counting down until our time with the Lord in heaven is over; we will never have to leave. Instead, in those coming ages" when we will get to experience "the incomparable riches of his grace," as Ephesians 2:7 describes it, we will do so forever.

And why? Not because we deserved it; we sinful wretches deserved just the opposite. But because of God's amazing grace, that wanted to make a gift of his salvation to us unworthy sinners and did so in Christ.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;

was blind, but now I see.
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed.

The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be,
as long as life endures.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we first begun.

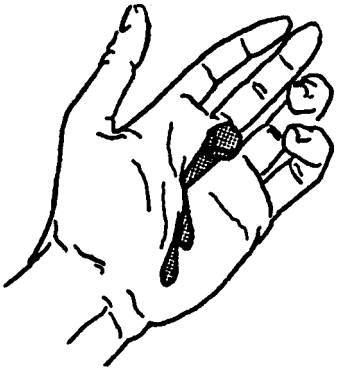
If I can know that God is absolutely trustworthy, if I can know that His love is absolutely real, that His kindness is utterly sincere, that His concern for me really does mean an abundant life, then He will do what is His very nature to do.

He will reach me way down deep where I really am. His grace can transform me, transform you. It can touch the very deepest motivating drives of our heart and He can make us a new person.

And this is the very thing that God is committed to doing for you and for me

Friend, amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that can save someone like you too!

If you feel lost, know that you can be found. If you're spiritually blind, then by simply asking God for it, through God's amazing grace you can have the joy of seeing -- yes seeing Grace blessing you too.



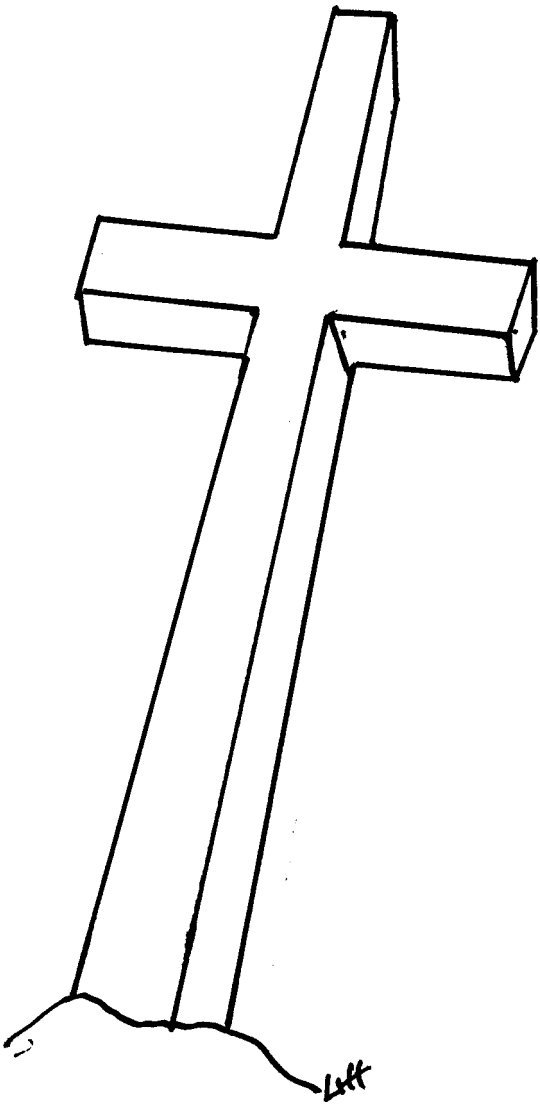
Prayer

Precious Lord, thank you for your
amazing grace that can save,
even wretches like me.

May we partake of that grace of God
and receive the blessing of the Father,
the Son and the Holy Spirit now and
forevermore, so that when we've been
there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,

We will certainly have no less days to
sing God's praise
than when we'd first begun.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.



Week 12
Improving With Age

One of my lecturers from college days said that the 5 B's of [ageing] are Broad, Bald, Bi-focals, Bunions and Bad Breath.

The underlying message is, "Growing old is bad, so do everything you can to stay young." That message, though, assumes that the opposite of "old" has to be "young." In fact, there's another way to look at it.

According to my Thesaurus the very first antonym for "old" is not "young".

The first-listed opposite of "old" is "new." When we look at it this way, we can get beyond just trying to hang on to that elusive thing called "youth.

Allow me to read (Genesis 12:1-4) "Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee: 2) And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make

thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: 3) And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. 4) So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran"

And (Genesis 17:5) "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations."

At 75, Abraham embraced new life, new purpose, new vision, and new hope.

Advancing age to him was not a disaster but a new challenge, not full of death but full of life, not filled with fate but with faith.

As the author of Hebrews reminds us, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, for he looked forward to the city whose builder and maker is God." All this and at 75 years of age

There are four truths about ageing I want to

touch upon today:

Firstly we are never forsaken as we age. Isaiah 46:4 reads, "And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you."

Secondly, we're not growing old, we're growing new.

A growing plant adds newness every day: new roots, new branches, new leaves, new flowers, even fruit.

In a certain sense, "to grow" means to keep adding something new.

We could even say that the expression "to grow old" is an oxymoron or a contradiction in terms.

We really can't grow old; we can only grow new.

That's what growth really is.

While still a child, my mother taught me this

poem:

"There is a sweet little, neat little lady I know
Who thinks she is growing old.
The older she grows / She is more like a rose
Whose petals of beauty unfold."

But we aren't plants, adding leaves and buds and flowers and fruit. So what kind of newness can we bring out each day? The Apostle Paul wrote about the importance of spiritual newness.

He spoke of the need to "put off the old person" and "to put on the new person" (Ephesians 4:11-24). We can all put on this "new person" through daily spiritual growth.

No matter what our age, we can all find areas of our lives where there's plenty of room for growth in Christian character.

When I look to myself, perhaps I need to be more patient with my family members, less self-centred, more open, and more willing to see and correct my faults.

These are all ways in which we leave the old

land, as Abraham did, and strike out for the new.

Spiritual growth can have a very definite effect on the way we view aging. As we grow in Christian character and learn to know God better, we may find that we've stopped thinking of ourselves as growing old, because we're actually growing new.

As we discover the joy of growing new, we find the future leading not to declining years but to the spiritual newness of becoming more like Jesus. Retirement is when we stop living at work and start work at living.

Thirdly, what's important is not the amount of days in our life but the amount of life in our days. Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."

Our natural, quantitative chronological age is unimportant as long as we're being renewed daily by the spirit of God.

While we want to measure everything in terms of quantity from profit margins to life, the real issue is quality. The question we need to ask ourselves is

not how many years we've lived but what's the quality of our life been, however short or long and what can we do tomorrow morning to improve on that.

The quality of our life can't be measured by the number of years we've lived.

As someone has said, "Many people brag about hitting 70, 80 or 90, who never hit anything in their life, except perhaps a golf ball or maybe a bottle." That's a cynical statement, but a certainly has a telling point.

Living a certain number of years is nothing to brag about. What matters is how we are living. And even more important, what are we reaching for now? If we begin to reach today, then this is the birthday of the rest of our life. Abraham's "birthday" came at 75 years of age, when he responded to the call to travel with God to a new land.

And fourthly, we can improve with age.

Being elderly doesn't mean we're in our declining years. We can be improving with age. It all depends on how we look at it.

A woman compared her elder years to the second half of a football game.

As a middle-aged football player in a ladies team she says that a certain game, long since decided, was drawing to a close. Short of breath and speckled with mud, trembling in every limb, she struggled up and down the field, waiting for the final whistle to blow.

She confessed to me, "How sad to have no energy or fuel for what should be the greatest years of our life on earth."

How sad to see elderly people who have lost their spirit and do little more than eat and play Bingo, or consume excessive amounts of food, or consign themselves to a do-nothing existence.

In reality, it doesn't matter how old we are, we can never outgrow our usefulness. This is particularly true when it comes to serving God. We can never be too old to serve the Lord.

In my sixty plus years of ministry, I've encountered elderly people who've told me, "I've

served my years in the church. Now it's time for the younger ones."

I feel so sad for people who say this, because, in effect, what they're saying is that they've outlived their usefulness to God.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

God called Abraham at 75 years of age, and he called Moses at 80 years of age and used Moses to lead the people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, until Moses was well over 100. Aaron was 83 when he began to perform miracles and Joshua was 85 when he led Israel into the promised land.

Please don't say you're too old to serve God. We're never too old.

In the 1952 Movie 'Monkey Business', the character Dr. Barnaby Fulton played by actor Cary Grant said, "You're old when you forget you're young."

The poet Edmund Waller wrote,
"The soul's dark cottage,

battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks
that time hath made."

Think of it this way, within each of us is a little child wanting to serve.

Don't lose touch with the child within you.

Rabbi Abraham Twersky tells a story about his great-grandfather who was sitting with other rabbinical scholars studying the Talmud when it was decided to take a break for refreshments.

One of the group offered to pay for the refreshments, but there was no one who volunteered to go for them.

According to Twersky, his great-grandfather said, "Just hand me the money, I have a young boy who will be glad to go." After a long time, he finally returned with the refreshments, and it became obvious to all, that the rabbi himself had gone and performed the errand.

Noticing their discomfort, the rabbi explained:

"I didn't mislead you at all. You see, many people outgrow their youth and become old men. I've never let the spirit of my youth depart. And as I have grown older, I always taken along with me that young boy that I had been. It was that young boy in me that did the errand.

We're never too old to serve God. You may ask, what can I do?

Let me say that the greatest power in the hand of humanity is prayer. This is something we can all do, and we don't even have to open our mouths to do it.

We can pray for our friends, Job 42:10 reads, "And the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends".

We can even pray for those who are not our friends. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus said, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

If we think we are too old to serve God, we simply need to release that young child within us, to do what needs to be done.

Someone has said, "We should live our lives in such a way that when we die even the undertaker will be sorry that we are gone".

For in Christ, we are improving with age.

You may be growing older,
And your step a mite bit slow;
You may not move as fast as once,
But, Oh, God loves you so.

You may think you're not needed.
That your work down here is through;
But, my beloved oldster,
God has a plan for you.

Your white hair shows the wisdom,
You've gathered through the years;
Your patience stands for victories,
Proves you've conquered many fears.

Your sweetness shows that Christ indwells,
His love in you abides;
As these virtues flow out from you,
You're blessing other lives.

Oh, don't ever be discouraged,
If others must wait on you;
You still can do a service,
Just let His light shine through.

So rejoice and live for Jesus,
And to others His kindness show
You're still wanted and needed,
You're God's messenger, you know!

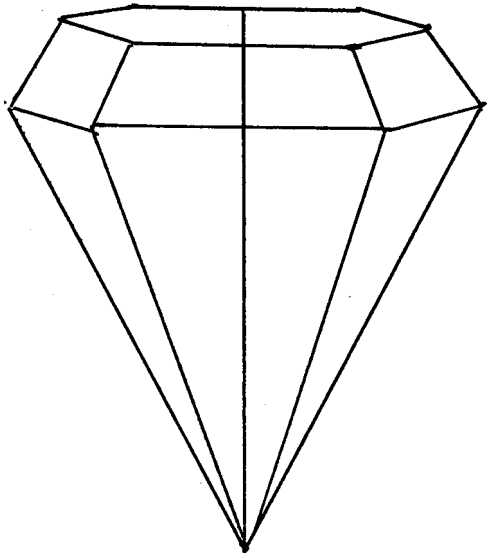
Adapted from a piece by
Methodist pastor Darrell Coats (2006)

Prayer

Lord, we all were once young and time has slowed us down. But we know that we are still precious in Your sight and we can still honour You with service no matter our age or abilities.

Please take us and use us for Your glory. And If we have not yet committed our aging into Your wise guiding and leading, we do so now.

And thus the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit shall be with us all, and all those whom we love and pray for, this day and for evermore. Amen.



Week 13
For Our Good

We will start by reading from the Holy Bible the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

In the centre of Main Street in Enterprise, Alabama, stands one of the strangest monuments in the world. It's a memorial to an insect! Handsomely carved in stone is the likeness of a boll weevil. Many believe that divine providence was involved in the circumstances that led to the erection of this unusual statue. In early plantation days almost everyone in the community raised cotton. But as the years rolled on, a serious pestilence infested the area in the form of a small beetle that punctured the boll of the plant.

As a result, it became almost impossible to bring a season's growth to maturity. George Washington Carver, along with several other scientists, became deeply concerned about the

situation and began intensive studies to see if any substitute crop could be grown in that part of the country. Raising peanuts was the answer, for they could be planted and harvested with very little loss.

In time, cotton gins were forgotten in that region, and it became known as an outstanding peanut centre of the world. Soon the farmers' profits far exceeded what they had earned from their best cotton yield. In the end, they realized that the destructive insect they had feared had actually triggered the research that brought them prosperity.

God often allows trials to unsettle our lives for a blessed purpose. Perhaps we are trying to "grow cotton" when we should be "raising peanuts." If so, the delays and disappointments we experience are just the gracious "boll weevils" sent to redirect us so that we will plant the crop of God's choosing.

Romans 8:28 - "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Not everything that comes into our lives can be classified as good. The Apostle Paul did not say

that all things are good. But, if we really believe this passage of Scripture, then we have to acknowledge that all things-the good, the bad, the sunshine, and the rain-are somehow working together by God's design for our ultimate well-being.

The "good" Paul spoke of is not always what we think is best. The next verse explains: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son ..." (Romans 8:29).

The "good" God wants to produce in us is conforming us into the image of Jesus Christ. If we keep this in mind, it's easier to understand how our trials and difficulties are all part of God's plan. The Lord desires to change us from what we are by nature to what he intends us to be.

We know that by his nature God is wholly good (Genesis 1; Lamentations 3:25; 1 Timothy 4:4; Mark 10:18). All of God's works and actions are expressions of his goodness and are designed to benefit his people. Even more, the "good" which is the goal of all his providential dealings with us is our ultimate well-being, namely our salvation.

The prospect of suffering is never pleasant. But armed with an attitude that faces life knowing whatever happens to us rests in the sovereign hand of God, we can be confident that God will never desert us. He will always be with us, working out his good purpose in every circumstance, always with our best interest at heart.

When we look back on the trials and difficult struggles that seemed far from good at the time, we can begin to see in hindsight how they were working for our benefit. We will often understand why God allowed us to go through the fiery trials of the past.

If we could live out our lives in reverse order, this particular verse would be so much easier to grasp.

Christine Wilson was painting the kitchen of her newly acquired country home with a bright orange colour called *Country Orange*.

Suddenly she stood dismayed as she accidentally submerged her left foot in a tray of fresh wall paint. A few minutes later, as she took off her comfortable, hole-in-the-toe painting sneakers, she regretted that she hadn't brought along another pair

of socks. She would have to sport a "Country Orange" big toe peeking out the front of her sandals when she picked up her four little sons from the babysitter's.

When she arrived at the sitter's home, the sitter suggested that since the boys were still napping, that Christine do a little shopping and call back for them later. Because Christine doesn't often get an offer like that, she wasted no time in heading for the department store.

On the way, she remembered her toe and how embarrassing it may be to explain her clumsiness, her orange toe, and her toeless sneaker. At the store, however, she quickly made her way to the linen department.

There she found that all things really do "work together for good." because was able to perfectly colour-match the new kitchen dishcloths and tea towels to her Country Orange toe.

If John James Audubon had succeeded as a merchant in Louisville, Kentucky, we probably would not have his marvellous paintings of birds nor an Audubon Society for the protection of birds.

When he failed in the grocery business in 1819, he began his career as a naturalist and painter of birds.

George Mueller wrote, "In one thousand trials it is not five hundred of them that work for the believer's good, but nine hundred and ninety-nine of them, and one beside."

For good reason, Romans 8:28 is a favourite verse of many. In fact, some consider this to be the greatest verse in the entire Bible. If we take it at face value, it tells us that nothing happens outside of God's plan for our good.

That's a tremendous promise to stand on when life doesn't feel so good. That's a solid hope to hold on to through the storm.

Of suffering and adversity, the great "Prince of Preachers" Charles Spurgeon said, "Most of the grand truths of God have to be learned by trouble; they must be burned into us with the hot iron of affliction, otherwise we shall not truly receive them."

Our life in Christ is based on God's good purposes, and that includes suffering: 2 Corinthians

1:5 says, "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too."

We share in these sufferings because we share Christ and because we live in a fallen world ruled at the present time by evil forces that are opposed to God and his purposes.

A man named James once planned to take a trip with some of his friends on a canal boat, but two days before they intended to leave, James injured his foot while chopping wood.

It was only a small cut, but the blue dye in the homemade socks he wore poisoned the wound, and James was compelled to stay at home.

While his friends were on their journey, a powerful preacher came to their town to hold revival meetings.

Since James didn't have anything else to do, he decided to attend. The message touched him deeply, and as a result, He surrendered his heart to the Lord.

Afterward he saw that he needed to change his life in many ways. He wrote, "New desires and purposes took hold of me. I determined also to seek an education, for I trusted that this would enable me to live more usefully for my Lord."

The man who made these comments was none other than the former President of the United States James A. Garfield.

The path to presidency for James Garfield started when he accidentally cut his foot while chopping wood.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

God doesn't allow disaster or permit evil randomly. Joni Eareckson Tada, who became a quadriplegic after an unfortunate accident, said, "God permits what He hates, to achieve what He loves."

Are you perplexed, frustrated, or maybe even devastated over events or things that have happened to you? Your life may seem like an unsolved puzzle,

but God knows where every piece fits into his good plan.

Maybe you've been trying to take your situation out of God's hand and work it into your own design. God is the Master artist who composed the picture of your life, and he will complete it if you let him.

You can trust that God never makes mistakes or lets anything slip through the cracks-even when calamity and heartache strike. God loves you. He has the power to do what you never dreamed possible. He is bringing about a wonderful plan for your life. He is working everything-yes, even that-for your good.

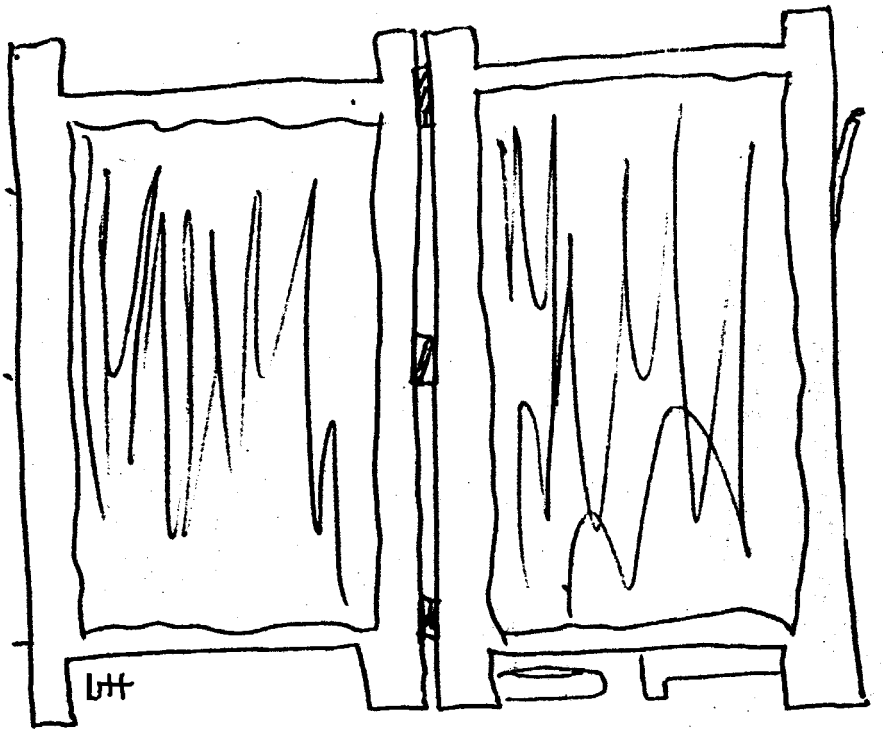
For my closing thought, I ask, "Would you like to marry someone whom your parents chose for you?" Dr. Joyce Hardin in her book, *'Three Steps Behind*', recounts a conversation with a Korean young lady. Dr. Hardin expressed surprise at the custom of arranged marriages and questioned how a woman could ever marry a person whom her father picked out.

The Korean replied that her father loved her

and knew her better than she knew herself. She was convinced that her father would never do anything to harm her and would make only the best choice for her.

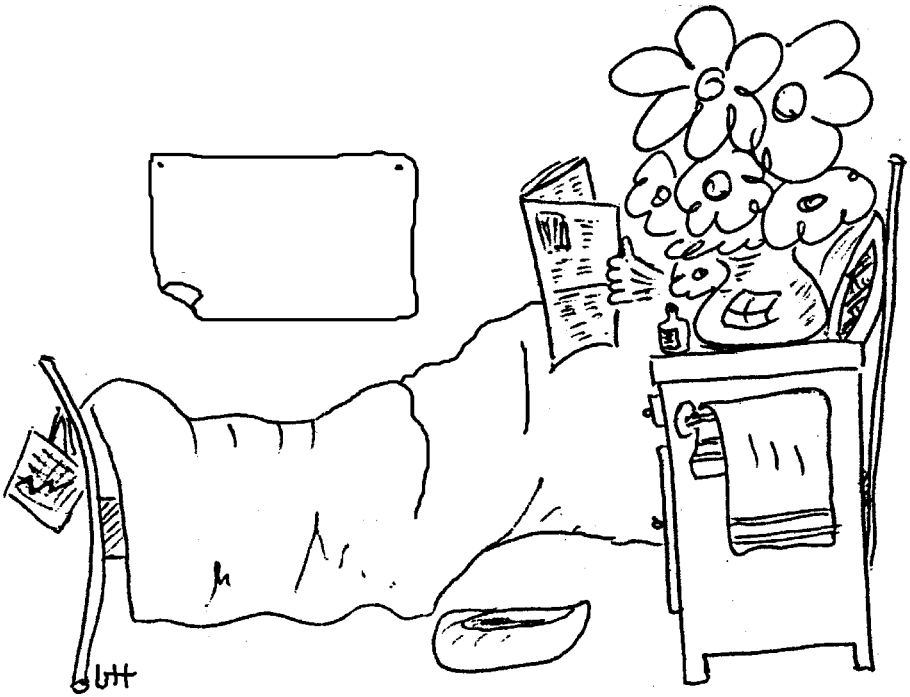
Besides, she added, she had the right to reject his choice, but doubted that she would.

Are we willing to trust our Heavenly Father as



much as some trust their earthly parents? If we are willing to completely surrender ourselves to Him we can believe that He will give us what is the very best for us.

What more comfort could we ask than to believe that even when we do not understand life's happenings, we can know that our Father loves us and only wants the best for us?



Prayer

Thank You Lord that you always have our best interest at heart and that in all things you can make them work out for good, and we trust You, even though the 'good' may not be immediately apparent to us..

And now, may the Lord bless us, and keep us: May the Lord make his face shine upon us, and be gracious unto us: May the Lord lift up his countenance upon us, and give uspeace.

May we have grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, from His comforting Spirit, and from the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, shall keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen

Week 14
He Hideth My Soul

One of the hymns we Christians like to sing is the classic "He Hideth My Soul," by the famous Fanny J. Crosby.

The refrain says:
"He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock
That shadows a dry, thirsty land;
He hideth my life in the depths of His love,
And covers me there with His hand."*

It seems that the author got her inspiration from Moses' experience at Mount Sinai, as told in the book of Exodus. I don't know about you, but many have difficulty relating to this hymn.

The main passage that connects to this particular hymn is Exodus 33:21,22: "Then the Lord said, 'Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have

passed by'" (NASB).

I have to admit that this passage has an astounding effect on me. Nonetheless, one aspect of it that outshines the rest (at least, for me) has to do with perceiving "the glory of God."

The Scriptures explicitly reveal that one of the means of knowing God involves being exposed to His ways. It appears that God's glory is exhibited in His character. In Exodus 33:18-22 Moses asked God to "Please, show me Your glory." Then God said, "'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.' But He said, 'You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.' And the Lord said, 'Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by'"

These passages present God as both a God of mercy and of justice. And verse 7 of chapter 34 indicates that forgiveness covers three facets of our

spiritual fall: iniquity, transgression, and sin.

In Hebrew, iniquity (*avon*) means turning from the truth; transgression (*peshah*) means rebellion; and sin (*chatt'ah*) means to go astray. These all stand in contrast to repentance (Hebrew: *nocham*, penitence, sorrow; and Greek, *metanoia*, change of mind, conversion).

While reflecting on Moses' witness to this awesome epiphany, I realize that getting to know God is proportional to benefiting from His goodness, which means basking in His infinite grace and mercy. He is patient and compassionate to those who seek repentance and renewal. On the other hand, He does not ignore the stubbornness and recklessness of the wicked; and they will definitely receive their due penalty. It's thus in our interest to seek His all-encompassing forgiveness.

But what does it really mean to be forgiven?

The Lord Himself discloses that a person's spiritual downfall involves at least three stages. At first, a typical person, whether Christian or non-believer, will have a tendency to lie at variance with

God's will or to question the validity and practicality of the Scriptures. As a result, that person will disregard the supreme authority of God and, in essence, live a life of rebellion. In the end, that person will be found guilty and be lost beyond redemption, unless there is a break in this downward pattern.

Although our main passage (about the cleft of the rock) points to a literal phenomenon, we still may draw symbolic meaning out of it.

For instance, when we consistently resist God's pleading, our hearts can become as stubborn as that of Pharaoh – as hard as an immovable rock. But when we allow God to strike those stony hearts of ours, then through the crack created, so to speak, we'll be able to see the glory of God. And "seeing His glory" means, in essence, to be acquitted and restored.

The Lord in His loving-kindness is always ready to intercept our downward fall, whether physically or spiritually, and the lives of Joseph and Moses in the Old Testament attest to that kind of miraculous intervention.

At some point both were consumed with pride

and impulsiveness. But God in His mysterious way changed them dramatically, changes that eventually became evident in the outcome of their lives.

However, not all people will experience genuine repentance and conversion after being exposed to God's glory. Like Joseph and Moses, Pharaoh was also proud and impulsive. And as He did with both Joseph and Moses, God also worked with him, bringing him almost to the brink of repentance (Ex. 12:31,32).

Unfortunately, after personally witnessing God's manifest wonders over all, Pharaoh's pride made him more stubborn than ever.

We should reconsider our beliefs and motives in light of the inspiration we get from the Scriptures. We should return to truth if we've been tempted to doubt God's Word, and fully submit to His authority – instead of merely living for ourselves. Then we should remain in His presence, despite the allurement of worldly pleasure and the influence of human reason.

The most challenging and difficult moments in our lives can make us better acquainted with Him.

As in the cases of Joseph in the dungeon and Moses in the wilderness, answers will not come easy. But we'll find that unsatisfied questions will providentially lead us to soul-searching and eventually to restoration.

A wonderful Savior is Jesus my Lord, a wonderful Savior to me; He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock, Where rivers of pleasure I see.

A wonderful Savior is Jesus my Lord, He taketh my burden away, He holdeth me up and I shall not be moved, He giveth me strength as my day.

With numberless blessings each moment He crowns, and filled with His fullness divine, I sing in my rapture, "oh, glory to God!" For such a Redeemer as mine.

When clothed with His brightness transported I rise to meet Him in clouds of the sky, His perfect salvation, His wonderful love, I'll shout with the millions on high.

He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock, that shadows a dry, thirsty land; He hideth my life in the depths of His love, and covers me there with His hand, and covers me there with His hand.

So let us allow the Lord to cover our faces with His right hand.

Prayer

Loving Lord, we often need
and seek Your protection.

Please give us the courage to both call
upon You and trust You
when we have challenging times.

May we always remember that it is
You who provides our numberless
blessings, to count them
and be thankful.
In Jesus' Name,
Amen.

Week 15
Love Lifts from Lament

Today I would like us to start by reading a passage from the Holy Bible, found in the Old Testament book of Lamentations, a series of five poems written after the fall of Jerusalem in the 6th century B.C.

In Lamentations 3:22-26 we read these words: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him.' The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

The writer of Lamentations, many believe it was the prophet Jeremiah, had endured the total destruction of Jerusalem and experienced first-hand the horrid brutality of a powerful conqueror, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

The temple had been destroyed along with all the palaces and fine homes of the city. The people had experienced famine and starvation. The promised Day of the Lord had come, and the devastation was complete. Israel was vanquished. And in the midst of that suffering, the prophet dares to write that God's compassion never fails.

Out of the turmoil of the times came words that have brought hope to countless suffering people. I pray that as you read these words, you too will be blessed.

Lamentations contains, amid the laments, many hopeful verses that contain a truth that we can apply to our own personal times of lament and challenge. Unpleasant and sometimes downright horrible hard times have and will continue to come to us; that is life on this earth.

Anxiety, pain and disease may seem to stalk us at every turn, but they're temporary visitors. The pain is here for today but tomorrow we are promised the mercies of the Lord.

In the early 1800's Henry Francis Lyte wrote

these words regarding the God described in Lamentations 3, addressing Him as the King of Heaven: "Praise Him, still the same forever, Slow to chide and swift to bless; Praise Him, praise Him, Alleluia, Glorious in His faithfulness."

The Psalmist in Psalm 90 begins with these words: "It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord ... To show forth His loving-kindness in the morning, and His faithfulness every night".

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "It is always unpleasant when reading an interesting article in a magazine to find yourself pulled up short with the ominous words, 'To be continued.' Yet they are words of good cheer if applied to other matters. What a comfort to remember that the Lord's mercy and loving-kindness is to be continued!"

God's faithfulness never comes to an end. Even if everything we've held dear is taken from us, God's steadfast love never ceases. When the darkness passes, the morning light will dawn and we will know once more that we are loved and cherished, and daily signs of that love will give peace and our tears will be replaced by shouts of joy.

Psalm 30:5 in the New International Version reads, "For His anger lasts only a moment, but His favour lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

For many, their first thoughts as they read Lamentations 3:22 "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed," is to thank God. I invite you with me to thank God for this great love and also for never breaking the promise to love you and me, not ever.

If we ask Him, God will help us each day, to keep us focused on Him, to find compassion and forgiveness for those who hurt us, and to understand that God is standing by and has everything under His control.

In 1923, while plagued with ill health, Thomas Obediah Chisolm wrote these words: "Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with Thee; Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not; as Thou has been Thou forever will be. Great is Thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed Thy

hand hath provided, great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"

In Lamentations 3:23 we read, "They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Every single morning, we can thank God. In the morning sunrise, while knowing the day is brand new, no mistakes have yet been made, and with the incredible possibilities of what the day might bring, we can revel in the fact that we are alive.

Add to that the fact that God loves the new day even more. He must love it, to renew all of His great and perfect love and compassion for us on a daily basis.

As we continue to read, Lamentations 3:24 reveals these words, "I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him.'" This is where we learn not to keep on trying to do everything by ourselves. When we wait for the Lord, then He provides what we need — God provides exactly, precisely and individually what each person needs, and God knows what you need right now.

And as much as we may desire something in

particular, what is best for us is God's will for us personally, far ahead of any idea we might have. When we believe (and we can), we will willingly and patiently wait for the Lord.

Lamentations 3:25 then continues with these fantastic words of encouragement, "The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;"

Finally, Lamentations 3:26 tells us, "it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." Eugene Peterson's *Message Bible* renders Lamentations 3:26, "It's a good thing to quietly hope, quietly hope for help from God."

For many of us this is hard because we feel we should be "doing something". Guess what, to wait quietly, and patiently *is* doing something. And while we are waiting we can hope, pray and talk it over with the Lord. Nothing is too big or small for Him. God wants us to wait on Him.

Prayer

You are a good Father. We will put our hope in You. We believe the promise in Your Word to send us fresh mercies each new day.

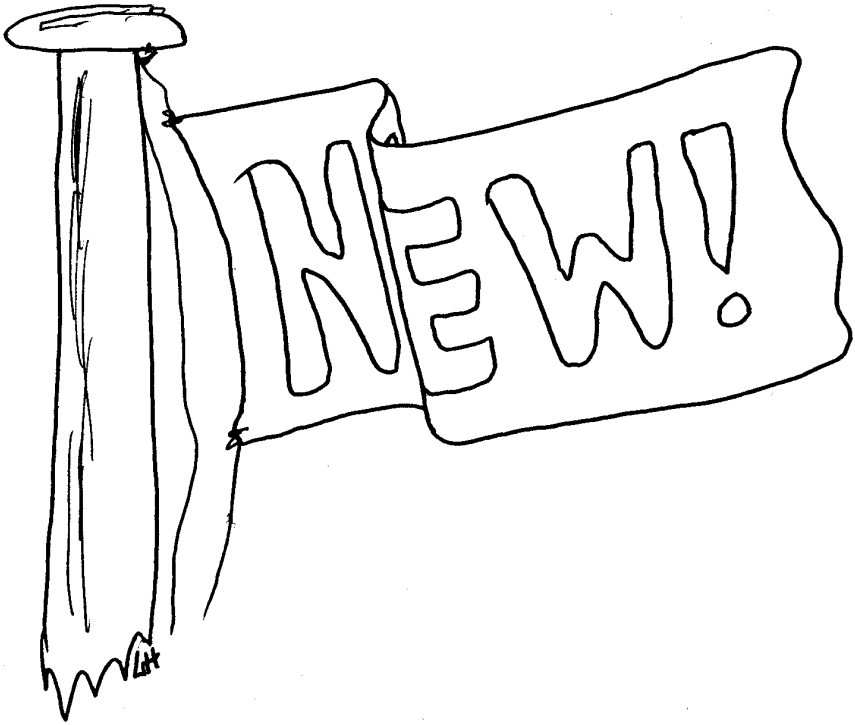
Although none of us can see past today, we trust in Your great love to never fail us.

Please give us Your grace, one day at a time, to face this day, and the next, and the next.

We cast our burdens on You, knowing You will carry us through.

May we have the courage and strength to meet the days ahead.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.


NEW!

Week 16
The New Commandment

Reading from the Holy Bible, Luke 10:25-37 in *The Message* paraphrase by Eugene Peterson: "Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. 'Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?'"

"He answered, 'What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?'

He said, 'That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence-and that you love your neighbour as well as you do yourself.'

'

Good answer!' said Jesus. 'Do it and you'll live.'"

"Looking for a loophole, he asked, 'And just how would you define 'neighbour'?'

Jesus answered by telling a story. 'There was

once a man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man."

"'A Samaritan travelling the road came on him. When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill-I'll pay you on my way back.'"

"'What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbour to the man attacked by robbers?'

'The one who treated him kindly,' the religion scholar responded.

Jesus said, 'Go and do the same.'"

In John 13:34 in the Authorised Translation (The King James Version) Jesus clarified this further by saying, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another".

Through my website, a reader asked, "What did Jesus mean when he said he was giving us a New Commandment? What was wrong with the 10 Commandments that He had to give a new one?"

Immediately prior to Jesus telling the well-known story of the Good Samaritan, we read in Luke 10:25-28 "And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he [Jesus] said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live."

A child was asked, "What was the first commandment?" To which he replied, "The first commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the

apple." This is not what the Bible says.

Believe it or not, the Commandments are really for our benefit. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 and verses 12 and 13 we read a very interesting statement and I want us to pay particular attention to the last few words.

Deuteronomy 10:12 and 13 read, "And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, To keep the commandments of the Lord, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good.

Did you get those last three words, "For thy good"? So obeying the Commandments is more to our advantage than for God's benefit.

The Ten Commandments can be easily divided into two sections - the first four (Exodus 20:1-7) relate to how we love God and the latter six (Exodus 20:8-17) relate to how we love each other.

The lawyer's answer encapsulated these two

sections - the first with the phrase, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind" and the second with the expression "Thou shalt love ... thy neighbour as thyself."

So, in summary, the last six of Ten Commandments are (as it were) one command: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." These exact same words, 'thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' were recorded around 1500 BC in Leviticus 19:18.

The Apostle Paul writing to the Church in Rome said, "... if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." (Romans 13:9,10)

There was nothing wrong with the 'old command' *per se*, but the problem was in the way that we applied it. This 'old commandment' refers to a particular way of loving others, that is that we love neighbour as we love ourselves. Sadly, most of us don't really love ourselves a great deal.

We are naturally selfish and think of ourselves before others, and we often don't take very good care of our bodies, our minds, and our spiritual condition. Some people love themselves so little they abuse themselves through addictions, self harm, or even to the point of suicide.

Jesus recognised this state of affairs and knew that a command to love others as poorly as we love ourselves was inadequate, since we don't really know what real love is. Jesus came to demonstrate in a very tangible way 'what love is.' 1 John 4:10 says, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us."

I might add here that if we don't love ourselves very much, we need to know that we are still loved by God, and he wants us to choose to live a full and abundant life (John 10:10). His love can help us to do just that. Don't be afraid to talk with a pastor, chaplain, priest or rabbi if you want that support.

Therefore Jesus could say that the way we should love, is not so much the way that we love ourselves, but the way that He loves us — unconditionally. This is what is recorded in the verse we read earlier from John 13:34, "A new

commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; *as I have loved you*, that ye also love one another" (emphasis mine).

Verse 35 goes on to say, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."

In the 1898 book '*The Desire of Ages*', a well known author penned these words: "In this last meeting with His disciples, the great desire which Christ expressed for them was that they might love one another as He had loved them. Again and again He spoke of this. 'These things I command you,' He said repeatedly, 'that ye love one another.'"

"His very first injunction when alone with them in the upper chamber was, 'A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.' To the disciples this commandment was new; for they had not loved one another as Christ had loved them." (Page 678)

We can trust the love of God because He loves us totally and unconditionally.

I'm sure many of us are familiar with the 23rd Psalm; the Shepherd's psalm.

As a child I often recited it to myself when I felt anxious:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever".

I occasionally wondered about this psalm, as it seems that The Good Shepherd didn't always lead me in pastures green and beside still waters. I recently

came across this anonymous poem, which sums it up nicely:

In "pastures green?" Not always.

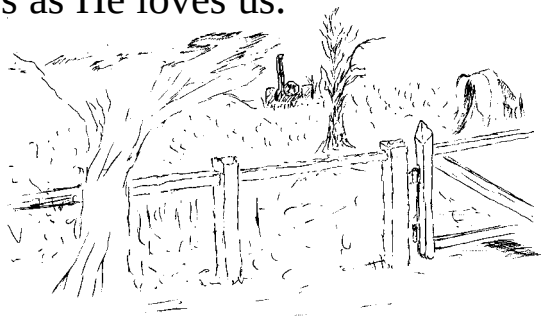
Sometimes He Who knoweth best, in kindness leadeth me in weary ways, where heavy shadows be.

And by "still waters"? No, not always so, oft-times the heavy tempests round me blow, and o'er my soul the waves and billows go.

But when the storm beats loudest, and I cry aloud for help, the Master standeth by, and whispers to my soul, "Lo, 'tis I."

So, where He leads me, I can safely go, and in the blest hereafter I shall know, why in His wisdom He hath led me so.

Because He loves us, we can be sure that he will lead us with wisdom and patience. He who loves us will surely help us to live out in our lives under His new commandment, and that is to love ourselves and others as He loves us.



Prayer

Thank, You, O thank you Lord,
for Your love to us
which is beyond measure.

Thank You that You love us so much
that You regard us with inestimable
value and immeasurable worth. So
much so that You sacrificed for us.

Please help us to live in such a way
that we show gratitude for this
incalculable love and that we will love
ourselves and others as You love us.

And we ask, too,
that Your blessing will be upon us,
in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Week 17
A Check-up from the Neck Up

A statement written in various forms and attributed to a range of people including the 19th. Century author Samuel Smiles and the English novelist and dramatist Charles Reade, (and later expanded by your author) goes something like this:

Be careful of your thoughts,
for your thoughts become your meditations.

Be careful of your meditations,
for your meditations become your emotions

Be careful of your emotions,
for your emotions become your attitudes.

Be careful of your attitudes,
for your attitudes become your words.

Be careful of your words,
for your words become your motivators

Be careful of your motivators,
for your motivators become your behaviours.

Be careful of your behaviours,
for your behaviours become your habits.

Be careful of your habits,
for your habits become your beliefs.

Be careful of your beliefs,
for your beliefs become your character.

Be careful of your character,
for your character becomes your destiny.

Be careful of your destiny,
for your destiny determines your eternity.

This came to mind recently when I was reading Philippians chapter four.

The Apostle Paul is giving us a check-up from the neck up. In Philippians 4:8 he wrote, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just,

whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

Paul is challenging us to say to ourselves, "A penny for your thoughts." He wants us not only to be careful of our thoughts, but also to think about what we are thinking about.

The thought life is one of the great battlegrounds of the Christian's experience. Satan knows that if he can win in this one battle, he most likely will win us over to his side.

The potential of the mind is phenomenal even though no-one has ever seen nor measured nor weighed nor photographed nor even touched a thought.

The human brain is the most complex arrangement of matter in this world. The average brain contains 12 billion cells, each which are connected to 10,000 other brain cells, totalling 120 trillion brain connections.

Scientists inform us that the average person uses only 10% of their minds capabilities during their entire lifetime. Most people will die with 10 to 11 million brain cells still unused.

Yet the battle for the mind is not just because it is the most complex mechanism in the world, but also because it is the most influential organ in our body. Our brain supervises everything we do, from the involuntary beat of our heart to the conscious decisions of life.

Fifteen prominent college professors took up a certain challenge in regard to motivation. They were asked, "If all the books on the art of moving human beings into action were condensed into one brief statement, what would that statement be?"

The collaborative result of their extensive deliberations was (and I quote): "What the mind attends to it considers; what the minds does not attend to it dismisses. What the mind attends to continually it believes, and what the mind believes it eventually does."

Simply put, whatever we think about is what

we become and do. Solomon said in Proverbs 23:7 “For as [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he”. Doug Firebaugh put it this way: “Your thinking is simply a reflection...of your heart.”

Whatever dwells in the minds will eventually be displayed in the life. Thoughts formulate attitudes, which then become our actions. There is practically nothing anyone has ever deliberately done the first time, that the decision to do it was not first made in the mind.

What we do in life stems from our thoughts because the feeding of the mind produces the fruit of the life. The author James Allen wrote, “Good thoughts bear good fruit, bad thoughts bear bad fruit, and man is his own gardener.”

What we put into the mind will eventually come out in the life. If we put garbage into our minds, that’s what is going to come out in how we live and behave. If a person thinks right, they live and do right. But if a person thinks evil, they live and do evil.

A good example of this is found in Genesis

6:5 “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” They displayed in life what they dwelt on in the mind.

People who suffer from impulse-control disorders fail to resist the impulse to steal, to attack someone, or to gamble.

Mental health clinicians know that these impulses often are preceded by a certain thought (or chain of thoughts), which leads to the undesirable behaviour.

Consequently, patients are trained to identify those thought triggers, dispel them immediately, and occupy their minds with something else.

In this way, they gain control of their thoughts and avoid the actions that these wrong thoughts so often lead to.

Notice what Solomon said in Proverbs 4:23-27 “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life. Put away from thee a froward mouth, and perverse lips put far from thee. Let thine

eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil".

Solomon was saying that we should guard what we hear and see, what we do and say and where we go, but first he says to keep our heart with all diligence – in other words we need to think about what we are thinking about. We need to think intelligently.

Incidentally, the word 'Intelligence' is derived from two words: "*inter*" and "*legere*".

"*Inter*" meaning "between" and "*legere*" meaning "to choose." An intelligent person, therefore, is one who has learned to "choose between."

J. Martin Klotsche tells us that [the thinking person] knows that good is better than evil, that confidence should supersede fear, that love is superior to hate, that gentleness is better than cruelty, forbearance than intolerance, compassion than arrogance, and that truth has more virtue than ignorance.

Notice Philippians 4:8, and consider Paul's

words “if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

Our thought life is to consist of that which is virtuous and worthy of praise. The word “virtue” (*arete*) speaks of that which is excellent compared to that which is cheap. The word “praise” (*epainos*) speaks of that which is praiseworthy. He is describing a proper thought life.

A good way to judge what we think about is to ask, “Is what I am thinking about worth thinking about? · Is this something that is praiseworthy, positive and beneficial?

Paul also speaks of a thought life that is practical.

The word “think” speaks of careful reflection. It speaks of thinking in the sense to calculate. It is to think logically and carefully.

The Greek word *logizomai* is variously translated “account, reckon, reason, take an inventory, and conclude”. It means to take account of things with a view of committing ourselves to them, to turn

what we think about into practical deeds. An idea is a funny little thing that won't work unless you do.

One little boy said that the Bible begins with the book of Genesis and ends with the book of *Revolutions*. Incorrect though his answer may be, it's a practical view of the Bible. What we read in the Bible should *revolutionize* our life.

Paul not only tells us how to think, but gives us a list of items to think about. He is saying that instead of thinking about the wrong things, here are some good things to think about. He lists six things we ought to think about: things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and things that are of good report.

We can only think one thought at a time. Thus if we are deliberately thinking good things we can't be thinking bad things.

The first three things that Paul mentioned (true, honest and just) seem to be personal and involve our inner character. These are things that if one continually thinks about will guard the inner life and personal character from being defiled.

The remaining three things he mentions (pure, lovely and of good report) seem to apply to our public life and how our life relates to others.

Psychologists say that ten thousand thoughts go through the human mind in one day. That is three million, five hundred thousand a year. Though I sometimes wonder if we really think at all before acting out some of the things we do and say.

Mankind can live without air for a very few minutes, without water for a number of days, without food for about two months, but some people seem to survive without a new thought for years on end.

There is a parable about a certain man who wanted to know a businessman's secret for getting ahead in business. "I'll tell you," said the businessman, "You should eat more fish. Fish is brain food. Give me five dollars and I'll get you some of the fish my wife gets me. Eat it and then see how you get on."

The enquirer handed over the five dollars and the fish was duly delivered. The next day the two met and the businessman asked whether any

improvement had been noted. "Well, no," said the other regretfully. "But tell me, isn't five dollars quite a lot for a small piece of fish? The businessman beamed, "There, now! Already your brain is beginning to work."

Oswald Chambers wrote, "Christian thinking is a rare and difficult thing; so many seem unaware that the first great commandment according to our Lord is, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . with all thy mind.'"

Someone asked Sir Isaac Newton how he discovered the law of gravity. He replied, "By thinking about it all the time."

And so we think in our thoughts the words of the Apostle Paul as recorded in Philippians 4:8 - "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

Bernard of Clairvaux once wrote, "Jesus, the

very thought of Thee, with sweetness fills my breast".

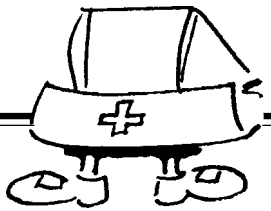
Prayer

Give us the courage, Lord to focus our
thoughts on you today
so that your sweetness
fills the beating hearts in our breasts.

And as we contemplate your great
love and your example, may our
minds be set on those things that are
true, honest, just, pure, lovely
and of good report.

And may the blessing of God the
Father, of Jesus the son
and of the Holy Spirit
be upon us now
to keep us faithful and true
until you come to take us home,
we pray in Jesus' name,

Amen.



Week 18
The Richest Kid in Town

There are two ways of being rich. One is to have all you want, the other is to be satisfied with what you have.

A monk found a precious stone or precious jewel. A short time later, the monk met a traveller, who said he was hungry and asked the monk if he would share some of his provisions. When the monk opened his bag, the traveller saw the precious stone and, on an impulse, asked the monk if he could have it. Amazingly, the monk gave the traveller the stone. The traveller departed quickly, overjoyed with his new possession.

However, a few days later, the traveller came back, searching for the monk. He returned the stone to the monk and made a request: "Please give me something more valuable, more precious than this stone. Please give me that which enabled you to give me this precious stone!"

1 Timothy 6:8 reads, And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.

An anonymous writer tells us: I'll never forget Easter 1946. I was 14, my little sister Ocy was 12 and my older sister Darlene was 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My dad had died five years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money.

By 1946 my older sisters were married and my brothers had left home. A month before Easter the pastor of our church announced that a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially.

When we got home, we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save $20 of our grocery money for the offering.

When we thought that if we kept our electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, we'd save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning

jobs as possible, and both of us baby sat for everyone we could. For 15 cents we could buy enough cotton loops to make three potholders to sell for $1. We made $20 on potholders.

That month was one of the best of our lives. Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night we'd sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them.

We had about 80 people in church, so figured that whatever amount of money we had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor had reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering.

The day before Easter, Ocy and I walked to the grocery store and got the manager to give us three crisp $20 bills and one $10 bill for all our change. We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before. That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep.

We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had $70 for the sacrificial

offering. We could hardly wait to get to church! On Sunday morning, rain was pouring. We didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet we got.

Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart, and her feet got wet. But we sat in church proudly. I heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls having on their old dresses. I looked at them in their new clothes, and I felt rich.

When the sacrificial offering was taken, we were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the $10 bill, and each of us kids put in a $20 bill. As we walked home after church, we sang all the way.

At lunch Mom had a surprise for us. She had bought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled Easter eggs with our fried potatoes! Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand.

We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word.

She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp $20 bills, one $10 and seventeen $1 bills. Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor.

We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash. We kids had such a happy life that we felt sorry for anyone who didn't have our Mom and Dad for parents and a house full of brothers and sisters and other kids visiting constantly. We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night. We had two knifes that we passed around to whoever needed them.

I knew we didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but I'd never thought we were poor.

That Easter day I found out we were. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, so we must be poor. I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and worn-out shoes and felt so ashamed. I didn't even want to go back to church.

Everyone there probably already knew we

were poor! I thought about school. I was in the ninth grade and at the top of my class of over 100 students. I wondered if the kids at school knew that we were poor.

I decided that I could quit school since I had finished the eighth grade. That was all the law required at that time. We sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and we went to bed.

All that week, we girls went to school and came home, and no one talked much. Finally on Saturday, Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money.

What did poor people do with money? We didn't know. We'd never known we were poor. We didn't want to go to church on Sunday, but Mom said we had to. Although it was a sunny day, we didn't talk on the way. Mom started to sing, but no one joined in and she only sang one verse.

At church we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun-dried bricks, but they needed money to buy roofs. He said $100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these

poor people?" We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week. Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope.

She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me, and I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering. When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over $100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our small church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church."

Suddenly it struck us! We had given $87 of that "little over $100." We were the rich family in the church! Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor again.

I've always remembered how rich I am because I have Jesus! Hebrews 13:5 reads, Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

Proverbs 15:16 says, Better is little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble therewith.

Proverbs 16:8 tells us, Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right.

John Oxenham wrote,

Some have much,
and some have more,
Some are rich, and some are poor,
Some have little, some have less,
Some have not a cent to bless;
Their empty pockets, yet possess
True riches in true happiness.

Psalms 37:16 advises, A little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked.

The clergyman, Jeff Olson, tells us that one day a father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his son how poor people live. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family.

On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, “How was the trip?” It was great, Dad.” Did you see how poor people live?” the father asked. Oh yeah,” said the son. So, tell me, what you learned

from the trip?" asked the father.

The son answered: "I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night.

Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us; they have friends to protect them."

The boy's father was speechless.

Then his son added, "Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are."

Philippians 4:11 says, Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.

Proverbs 28:6 reads, Better is the poor that

walks in his uprightness, than he that is perverse in his ways, though he be rich.

At first glance she looked like any other old woman. Plodding along in the snow, alone, neglected, head bowed. People passing on the busy footpath averted their eyes, lest she remind them that pain and suffering did not stop to celebrate Christmas.

A young couple, smiling, talking, laughing, arms loaded with Christmas presents, took no notice of the old woman. A mother with two small children hurried by, on their way to grandmother's house. They took no notice.

A minister walked by proudly carrying his Bible in his right hand, like a well armed Christian soldier. But his mind was stayed on heavenly things, and he took no notice.

If these people had noticed, they would have seen that the old woman wore no shoes. She walked barefoot in the ice and snow. With both hands the old woman gathered her worn button-less overcoat at the collar to keep out the wind. She stopped and stood bent and bowed at the bus stop. A red and blue scarf

covering her head, she waited for the downtown bus.

A gentleman carrying an important looking briefcase waited near her, not too closely. After all, she could have something contagious.

A teenage girl also waited for the bus. She glanced repeatedly at the old woman's feet, but said nothing.

The bus arrived and the old woman slowly, painfully boarded. She sat on the side seat just behind the driver. The gentleman and the teen-age girl hurried to the rear. The man sharing the seat with the old woman shuffled uneasily and twirled his thumbs. "Senile," he thought.

The bus driver saw her bare feet and thought; "This neighbourhood is sinking deeper and deeper into poverty, I hate to see it. I'll be glad when they put me on the College Park route."

A little boy pointed at the old woman. "Look, Mother, that old lady is barefoot." The embarrassed mother slapped his hand down. "Don't point at people, Andrew. It's not polite to point." She looked out the

window.

"She must have grown children," a lady in a fur coat suggested. "Her children should be ashamed of themselves." She felt morally superior, because she took good care of her mother.

A teacher seated near the middle of the bus steadied the bag of gifts on her lap. "Don't we pay enough taxes to handle situations like this?" she said to a friend seated beside her. "It's this tax-cut crazy government administration, her friend replied. "They rob the poor and give to the rich." "No, its the Opposition Party," a grey-haired man behind them interjected. "Their welfare programs just made people lazy and kept them in poverty."

"People have to learn to save their money," a well-dressed young college man added. "If that old woman had saved when she was young, she wouldn't be suffering now. It's her own fault."

And all these people beamed with satisfaction that their acumen had delivered such trenchant analysis.

But a kind businessman felt offended by this murmuring detachment of his fellow citizens. He reached into his wallet and took out a crisp twenty-dollar bill.

He strode proudly down the isle and pressed the bill into the old woman's unsteady, wrinkled hand. "Here, Madam, get yourself some shoes." The old woman nodded her head in thanks. The businessman strode back to his seat, feeling pleased with himself, that he was a man of action.

A well-dressed Christian lady had noticed all of this. She began to pray silently. "Lord, I don't have money. There is no way I can help. But Lord, I can turn to you in every need. Lord, I know that you are a loving God. You make a way out of no way. Now Lord, let your blessing shine on this old woman. Let shoes fall like manna from heaven, so that this old woman can have shoes for Christmas." And the Christian lady felt supremely spiritual.

At the next stop, a young man boarded the bus. He wore a heavy blue jacket, a maroon scarf around his neck, and a grey woollen cap pulled down over his ears. A wire running under the cap and into his

ear was connected to a music player. The young man jiggled his body in time to music only he heard. He paid his fare and plopped down on the sideways seat directly across from the old woman.

As the young man's glance caught the old woman's bare feet, His jiggling stopped. He froze. His eyes went from her feet to his. He wore his expensive, new, brand name sneakers. For months he had saved from his minimum wage pay to buy these sneakers. Everybody in the gang would think he was "so cool."

The young man bent down and began to untie his sneakers. He removed his impressive new sneakers. He removed his socks. He knelt down before the old woman. "Ma'am," he said, "I see you have no shoes. Well, I have shoes."

Carefully, gently, he lifted the old woman's crusty feet in his hands. He placed his socks and his fine sneakers on the old woman's feet. The old woman nodded in thanks.

Just then the bus arrived at the next stop. The young man left the bus and walked away, barefoot in

the snow. The passengers crowded at the windows to watch him as he plodded barefoot through the snow.

"Who is he?" one asked.

"He must be a prophet," said another.

"He must be a saint," someone suggested.

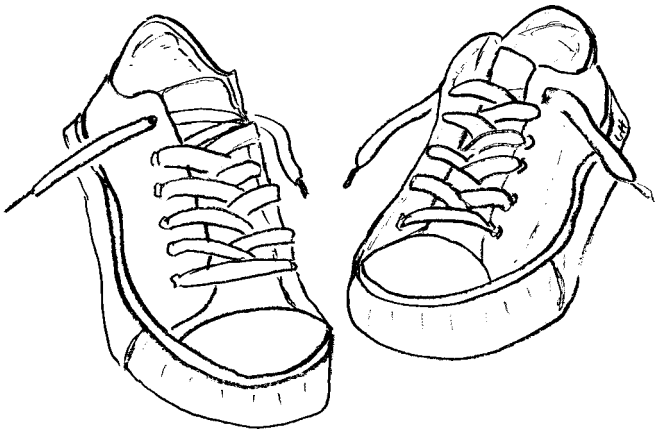
"He must be an angel," said yet another.

"Look! There's a halo around his head," somebody shouted.

"He must be the Son of God," said the Christian lady.

But the little boy who had pointed, said, "No Mother, I saw him clearly. He was only a man."

Sometimes I feel that I'd like to ask God why he allows poverty and injustice when he could do something about it, however I guess that I'm afraid that God might ask me the same question."



Prayer

"Loving Father,

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world.

Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting.

Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.

For Jesus' sake.

Amen."

(A prayer by Robert Louis Stevenson)

Week 19
What are You Looking At?

Reading the first fifteen verses of Genesis chapter three from *The Message Bible* paraphrase by Eugene H. Peterson

Genesis 3:1-15

1 The serpent was clever, more clever than any wild animal God had made. He spoke to the Woman: "Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?"

2-3 The Woman said to the serpent, "Not at all. We can eat from the trees in the garden. It's only about the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'Don't eat from it; don't even touch it or you'll die.'"

4-5 The serpent told the Woman, "You won't die. God knows that the moment you eat from that tree, you'll see what's really going on. You'll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil."

6 When the Woman saw that the tree looked like good eating and realized what she would get out of it-she'd know everything!-she took and ate the fruit and then gave some to her husband, and he ate.

7 Immediately the two of them did "see what's really going on"-saw themselves naked! They sewed fig leaves together as makeshift clothes for themselves.

8 When they heard the sound of God strolling in the garden in the evening breeze, the Man and his Wife hid in the trees of the garden, hid from God.

9 God called to the Man: "Where are you?"

10 He said, "I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked. And I hid."

11 God said, "Who told you you were naked? Did you eat from that tree I told you not to eat from?"

12 The Man said, "The Woman you gave me as a companion, she gave me fruit from the tree, and, yes, I ate it." God said to the Woman, "What is this that you've done?"

13 "The serpent seduced me," she said, "and I ate."

14-15 God told the serpent: "Because you've done this, you're cursed, cursed beyond all cattle and wild animals, Cursed to slink on your belly and eat dirt all your life. I'm declaring war between you and the Woman, between your offspring and hers. He'll wound your head, you'll wound his heel."

My mother, the parent of six of us, was very skilled in making us feel valued. While still an infant, I would bring a picture home from school and instead of Mum asking, "What is it?" she would invariably say, "What an interesting picture. Hold it up for me so I can get a good look at it."

Then having determined which way up it went without having to ask, she would then say, "Tell me the story about it." She would then know what it was supposed to be, once again without having to ask.

I was at a meeting recently when a child crept into the room to see her daddy. This child was so proud of her artwork-her masterpiece-she could hardly wait to show her daddy. "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy. Look what

I made," she whispered. Her daddy looked at it. "That's a beautiful…"

He turned it this way and that. He looked at it some more. "That's a beautiful…" - still trying to figure out what it is. Finally she said, "It's a ele-pant." "Oh, yeah. It's wonderful. Great job."

That doesn't only happen with preschoolers. Go to an art fair, art in the park, or an art museum sometime and you'll see things that make you scratch your head. That's art? Look at a seemingly blank canvas and ask yourself, "What am I looking at?"

Conceptual art was supposedly invented over 100 years ago by a Frenchman named Marchel Duchamp. I looked up the story in the encyclopaedia. I'd rather not go into any detail, suffice to say that it involved a porcelain bathroom fixture.

I don't consider Marchel Duchamp the inventor of conceptual art. Thousands of years earlier, Adam and Eve were walking through God's art gallery, called Eden. Before them was displayed one masterpiece after another. Very literally, Adam looked at God's artwork and said, "It's an elephant." And it was an

elephant. He said, "It's a giraffe." And it was a giraffe.

On a certain day, Eve was in the middle of God's gallery looking at a tree. God had given them both this tour before so they knew this was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But on this particular day, Eve wasn't the only one gazing at it. A serpent slides up next to her and basically asks, "What are you looking at?"

And when Eve explains to him what she sees as God explained it, the serpent sneers, "That's what God said?" And then he proceeds to take on the role of tour guide. He flips her view of this tree on edge, and says with a villainous whisper, "Why don't you look at it from this point of view: God created this whole place for you. He said, 'Rule over the earth and subdue it.' He said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.' Isn't this such a tree? Look at it. So I think you're kind of being silly, Eve. God could not have said, 'Don't eat from this tree.' Besides, he wants the best for you. He knows this would be good for you. You'd get more knowledge. So I think you're mistaken in what you heard concerning God's command. So go

ahead. Eat. He'd want you to have it."

The serpent continues, "But let's just say, for the sake of argument, he actually did forbid you from eating this tree. What kind of a God would keep knowledge from you? Eve, do you really think that God has your best interests in mind? Do you want a God who forbids you from eating something so useful? And he threatens you with death? What kind of God is that? Go ahead. Eat. A God who doesn't have your best interest in mind ought not to be listened to."

You see the devil's tactics? He's either going to try to get Eve to doubt the Word of God ("Oh, that's not what God said.") or he's going to get Eve to doubt the goodness of God.

Whichever way, his smooth, slippery speech successfully slithered its way into her brain, it made her look at that tree differently. "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it."

The woman saw the fruit of the tree was good

for food and pleasing to the eye. It wasn't the bite that brought death. The bite was merely the outward action that followed the sin in her heart. Whether Eve's specific sin was elevating the devil's Word above God's Word or doubting God's goodness, the result was the same: God was no longer number one.

As we stroll through the art gallery we call life, the devil's tactics remain the same. He slides up next to us, often incognito, and whispers, "What you are looking at?"

What are you looking at as you ponder that job opportunity that God has painted for you to consider? What are you looking at as you gaze at that masterpiece called marriage? What are you looking at as you contemplate which college to attend?

For Eve, it was the tree of in the middle of the garden. For us, it could be a variety of things that Satan could flip on edge so that we question the Word or goodness of God.

How are we going to be prepared?

That is where Christian fellowship comes in.

This is where Bible Study can prepare us. This is where personal devotions can help us to distinguish God's voice from all others.

What is the purpose of these tools we have at our disposal? Well, do you remember what the devil's tactic is when he slides up next to us? He's either going to try to get us to doubt what God's Word says or he's going to attempt to get us to doubt God's goodness.

What Are You Looking At?

The best way not to doubt what God's Word says is to know what God's Word says. The devil's not a dummy. He knows that knowledge destroys doubt.

So when you're looking at a buying a Bible, he might say, "What are you looking at? I see money that could be used to serve others."

When you're thinking about joining a Bible class, the devil may slide up and say, "What are you looking at? Mmm… I wouldn't if I were you. You're not going to learn much and surely there are more fun things to do."

You open a bible reading app on your mobile 'phone, the devil might slither up to you and say, "What are you looking at? I don't think that's such a good idea. You don't know the word well enough. You're just going to get confused."

If Adam and Eve, who had a perfect untainted will, could be tempted and fall when they were looking at something that was designed to give them an opportunity to glorify God, what will we do when we look at the gallery of opportunities to grow in God's Word and Satan whispers, "What are you looking at?"

Will our Eve-like eyes be drawn to another piece of fruit as being more pleasing or more important than being fed by God's Word?

Or maybe we don't yet know God and His Word and the old Devil sidles alongside and says "What are you looking at? Cast your eyes over here, this is much more interesting."

Or maybe we're Adam. Sometimes we forget Adam's role in this whole fall. We think he was off doing man things like wrestling with the bears while

Eve was walking among the flowers in the garden. What does Scripture say? When Eve ate the fruit, "she also gave some to her husband who was with her."

He was certainly nearby. He maybe didn't eye up the fruit first. But he saw his wife, the one of whom he said, "This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," he watched his suitable helper think something else was more suitable than God's Word. He watched her doubt God's goodness, and he doesn't say a thing.

Is that you? Is that me? We may not be feeding on forbidden fruit or directly in the devil's sights. But do you see your loved one trade in God's Word for the devil's word on a certain issue. Are you silent? Look at how that turned out for Adam. Not only did his wife get caught, it didn't take long for him to doubt God's Word. He knew God's warning, "Eat the fruit and you'll die."

When he didn't see Eve keel over right away, he concluded, "God's Word must be wrong." So he ate, too.

"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig

leaves together and made coverings for themselves." One moment they're looking at something that promises so much hope, so much knowledge and wisdom. The next moment they're only looking at shame and guilt.

Now God, the Creator who made Adam and Eve the curators of this perfect gallery, walks up to them and asks, "What you looking at?" They made up a bunch of excuses. But they knew what they saw as they looked at their situation and it made them scared.

Maybe the same thing happens to us when we look at our situations. We give bumbling excuses, but in our hearts we're scared.

Listen what happens next: God turns to the devil, "What are YOU looking at? You look so smug. You think you're looking at victory? Let me tell you something: I will put hostility between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel."

In other words, let me show you another garden. Adam and Eve struggled in Eden's garden

over my command about a tree. In the future, one of Eve's offspring is going to be in a garden, a Gethsemane garden, struggling over a command about a tree as well. A tree called the cross. Devil, you're going to whisper in his ear, "What are you looking at? You don't have to go there."

The contrast between these two gardens is striking. Adam and Eve are here in a bright sunny garden. God said, "Obey me regarding the tree and you will live." But they didn't.

God's Son is going to be in a dark gloomy garden and God will say, "Obey me about the tree and you'll die." And he'll do it.

"And, devil, you'll be crushed." God will turn a tree of death into a tree of life for Adam and Eve and all who follow. And in so doing, not only will He give them life, He'll also undo Satan's lie.

Satan told Eve, 'You can't trust God. You can't trust his Word. You can't trust his goodness.' Guess what? It's clearer now than it ever has been before, because God's not giving up on them. In another garden, God will give His life so they have a life Satan will never able to take away.

"What are you looking at?" We can look at the trees of this world that the devil can turn on end. But far better to fix your eyes on a tree that he can't turn over. A tree by which the devil was overturned. Should you open up most Bibles to Genesis chapter 3 and you'll see an editor's title that says something like, "The Fall."

Let’s read verses 14 and 15 again, 'God told the serpent: "Because you've done this, you're cursed, cursed beyond all cattle and wild animals, Cursed to slink on your belly and eat dirt all your life. I'm declaring war between you and the Woman, between your offspring and hers. He'll wound your head, you'll wound his heel.'"

Without verse 15, it is the most depressing chapter of the Bible. Prior to verse 15 we see shame, fear, pain, dysfunction, etc. Maybe you're feeling some of these feelings now. But verse fifteen changes our view of Genesis chapter 3. Verse 15 changes our view of the Bible because verse 15 shows us Jesus. Jesus would wound Satan's head, and Satan gets to do no more than a nip at the heel of Jesus. Resurrection morning proved this.

What are you looking at? Fix your eyes on God (See Hebrews 12:2). Fix your eyes on God, for nothing shows more clearly the truth of His Word. What are you looking at? Fix your eyes on God, for nothing shows more clearly the trustworthiness of His goodness for you.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we look upon Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, we cannot help but want to share in His goodness, to share in His love, to share an eternity with Him and to share this with others.

When he asks us what we're looking at, may it be to God that our eyes are fixed.

We ask for the blessing of God that You will show us your love and goodness.

This is our prayer, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Week 20
Psalm 20

I would like to start this devotional by commencing with a short psalm composed by King David.

Psalm 20 will be our focus for today.
Psalm 20 reads,

"The Lord hear thee in the day of trouble; the name of the God of Jacob defend thee; send thee help from the sanctuary, and strengthen thee out of Zion; Remember all thy offerings, and accept thy burnt sacrifice; grant thee according to thine own heart, and fulfil all thy counsel. We will rejoice in thy salvation, and in the name of our God we will set up our banners: the Lord fulfil all thy petitions. Now know I that the Lord saveth his anointed; he will hear him from his holy heaven with the saving strength of his right hand. Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God. They are brought down and fallen: but we are risen, and stand upright. Save, Lord: let the king hear us when we call."

Psalm 20 deals with the bringing of the ark back to Jerusalem. At this time there was a war with the Syrians. Before going to war, David writes the twentieth Psalm. You will find this mentioned in verse one when he speaks of the Lord hearing him in the day of trouble.

At the beginning of this psalm, David invites the God of Jacob to be his defender. The name Jacob means 'Usurper" or "Heel Snatcher." The name Israel, on the other hand, means "Governed by God."

Therefore, according to Jon Courson's Commentary, when we read about the God of Israel in the Old Testament the reference is to the nation when it was obedient to God. When we read about the God of Jacob (such as in this psalm), the reference is to the nation when it was following its human tendencies. Thus, David's prayer is very relevant to you and me today. David's prayer is, "May the Lord hear us even when we're not doing as well as we ought."

Then in verse two he seeks help from the sanctuary and from Zion. The psalmist reminds God in verse six that the Lord saves His anointed, and then

in that amazing verse seven, this military commander-in-chief speaks of the foolishness of trusting in chariots and horses (which were used in battle) and in the wisdom of trusting in the name of our Lord for battle.

In the book of Revelation, Jesus said that He was Alpha and Omega, the first and last. While thinking about David's reference to horses and chariots, have you ever noticed that the last letter of the Greek alphabet, the Omega, looks very much like a horseshoe, an ancient symbol of good luck?

In the modern world in which we live there remain many evidences of this superstition, such as good-luck charms and other talismans. A talisman (or amulet) is any object thought by some to be inhabited by a spirit that will bring good luck or benefit to its possessor.

Carrying a rabbit's foot, or nailing a five-pointed star or an inverted horseshoe over the door, are examples of this. The Psalmist reminds us that it is better to depend on the presence of Jesus Christ than to rely on the good luck of the horseshoe.

And it is not just our good-luck charms that are foolish; many of our plans are also foolish.

It may be that they are not thoroughly considered in advance: In 1981, the Italian shipbuilding firm Inter-Marine at Ameglia landed a contract from the Malaysian government worth four million British pounds. Though they usually built smaller vessels, Inter-Marine contracted to build a mine sweeper and three military launches.

It was only after the work was completed that they remembered their shipyards were connected to the sea by the Magre River, and over the river hung the Colombiera Bridge. Not one of the four new vessels could pass beneath it.

Or maybe our plans put too much trust in men rather than God: The Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian the First planned for himself a colossal mausoleum to be erected in Innsbruck, Austria. He once said, “The man who makes no memory of himself in his lifetime will enjoy no memory after his death and will be forgotten as soon as the bells cease to toll.” The tomb in Innsbruck was not completed until sixty-three years after his death, and

Maximilian is buried in Wiener Neustadt. Innsbruck is in western Austria and Wiener Neustadt is 530 kilometres away in eastern Austria.

How wise King David was to claim the blessing and power of God, and victory through this power before fighting a battle. In my mind's eye I picture David preparing for the battle, but before girding himself for the conflict he pauses to write this Psalm as a part of that preparation.

You see, it all comes down to an issue of trust: Horses or God? Man's ways or God's ways? Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "All I have seen, teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen."

The Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, wrote, "Our first step to victory in [any] warfare is to trust only in the mercy and grace of God."

When the ancient Jew was facing a time of testing, he would read Psalm 20. According to biblical researcher Dr. Jack Hyles, when the Israelite general was facing a battle, he would read or sing the twentieth Psalm. It was to be read and sung BEFORE the battle or the testing. Are you facing some serious battle?

Are you awaiting test results or maybe surgery? Is there a testing just ahead of you? Then Psalm 20 is for you, as much as it was for David.

Psalm 20 verse 9 says that the Lord saves. From this verse we get one of the names of God: Jehovah-Hoshe'ah (The Lord Saves). Among modern Orthodox Jews today, the name of the Lord is considered so sacred that it's deemed blasphemy to say it. Instead, they often call the Lord "HaShem", which simply means in Hebrew "the name."

This verse reminds us that the name of the Lord is something important, something sacred, something powerful. It is not that any inherent magical powers emanate from the name itself; instead, it's what the name represents that is important, because it should call to mind the kind of awe and reverence the Bible says that it deserves.

In Bible times, a name was often closely linked with what it named, more so than now. Romans 10:13 tells us that "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." There is no salvation in the name itself; salvation is found in the person Whom it represents, Jesus Christ. Verse seven also says that

we trust in the name of the Lord our God. In the Bible, God is so closely associated with His names that they are often used in a manner that is indistinguishable. That is why the Bible is so clear about why we should use the name with reverence.

The commandment recorded in Exodus 20:7 says, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”

To profane the name is, in an indirect sense, to profane the One who is named. So often, in many languages, the name of God is used as a profanity, curse, oath, invective, expletive or a swear word.

We must realize, however, that respecting the name of God is not just a matter of what we say. Many of us who would never think of using God’s name in a vulgar or obscene context, sometimes fail to respect God’s name because we simply do not take God seriously in the way we live.

When our day is consumed with activity that does not take God into consideration, our problem solving becomes a matter of relying on human

resources and God is nowhere to be found in the picture. Which is the more serious breech of God's command: To speak God's name profanely or to give lip service to Him, to tell others that we trust Him, but then ignore Him in our everyday plans?

The Bible translator J. B. Phillips wrote an interesting book that he titled, "Your God Is Too Small". In the book he wrote about some inadequate concepts of God, and another author, Mike Cope, picked up on this idea and suggests that our God is "too middle-sized."

We affirm a lot of things about God. He is all powerful, all knowing and ever present. He is majestic and glorious. He is the God to Whom we must give account. We are invited to draw near to Him. Our knowledge of God is right on target.

But when it comes to practical living, then I wonder if we're not sure if God is really capable of doing all those things He has promised.

Mike Cope suggests we do not believe what we know. It seems that we can talk about Him if we are asked, but when we are struggling with our health,

uncertainty the mortgage payments, a sick child or the loss of a job, then Bible-type talk about God tends to sound rather hollow. That is because we believe in what Cope calls “a middle-sized God”.

He is big enough to judge us in eternity, but not big enough to help with our immediate problem. To hallow or reverence the name of God means to treat His name with respect, not only in the way we talk, but also in the way we trust.

God wants to give us victory in our life. God wants to give you victory in your life.

Whatever kind of difficult or challenging situation we encounter, we just have to ask God for His help and trust that He will answer as He sees is for our best good.

The author Roger Ellsworth reminds us that, “We can trust God, not to remove all crises and difficulties from our lives, but to bring us through them, and, in so doing, to achieve his purpose in our lives.

May you have this assurance today.

Prayer

May the peace of God be in our hearts

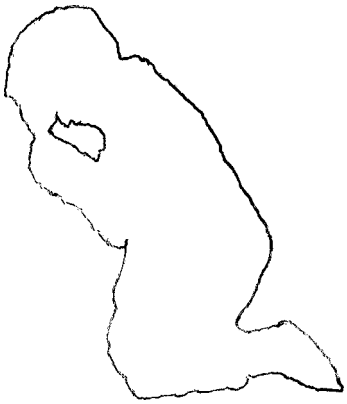
The grace of God be in our words

The love of God be in our hands

The joy of God be in our very being
and in the song
that our life sings in praise to God.

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen.



Week 21
Pleasing God

Twenty-year-old Linda Lenehan wrote to me regarding a book she was writing called "Precious Times". In her email she describe the main character in the book as being (quote) 'fine'. However, further down in the email she clarified what she meant by 'fine'.

She wrote, "Yes, she's fine, F-I-N-E, which really stands for stands for 'Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional'".

Reading from Scripture, Luke 18 beginning at verse 10

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have

mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God."

We have two people in this story: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Unlike the tax collector, The Pharisee has a great opinion of himself.

Where do you think they got this opinion? Was this something that they knew at birth? Something they figured out for themselves, independent of anyone else? Or something that others told them?

I suggest that the Pharisee was a gold star person. By this I mean that, no doubt, plenty of people told him he was great.

And I suspect that plenty of people told the tax collector that he didn't measure up to gold-star status.

Luke starts the story in Luke 18 about the Pharisee and the tax collector by saying that it was for a certain audience. Verse 9 says, "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable…"

I see two groups here: those who thought they were pretty good and everybody else. Jesus' audience no doubt agreed with the Pharisee that he was a pretty good guy and that the tax collector was no good at all.

They might not have been too sure about their own standing, but they knew the bad guys from the good guys.

They believed that Pharisees were good and tax collectors were bad.

According to verse 13 that I read earlier, even the tax collector agreed that he had some problems.

Most people think this parable is about humility - and it is - but consider what verse 14 says about God's attitude toward man.

Let me paraphrase: "You thought the Pharisee was the good guy," Jesus says, "but in , God's sight he is the bad guy because he was not justified by God."

People had one attitude - God had a different attitude. My friends, this distinction between what

other people think about you and what God thinks about you is critical!

In Matthew Chapter 16, verse 19 Jesus speaks of keys to the kingdom of heaven. This morning I want to talk to you about something that I believe is one of the "keys" to the kingdom.

That key is focussing on pleasing God. Focussing on what God thinks about you.

Pleasing god. Being more concerned about what God thinks than what man thinks. The Pharisee and the tax collector story I think are about pleasing god.

I am going to suggest that this concept of pleasing god will improve our life, right now, in two distinct ways - ways all designed to give us more peace.

First, it will make our life less stressful, and secondly it will improve our self-image.

What do you think of that? In the next few minutes we will be able to boost our self image and

lower our job stress and you got this book for free!

So lets get to it and find out if this message is worth what you paid for it!

Lets talk about job stress.

Psalm 75:6-7 in the KJV translation says, "For promotion cometh neither from the east nor the west nor the south. but God is the judge; he putteth one down and setteth up another." The NIV says, "No one from the east or the west or the desert can exalt a man. but it is God who judges: he brings one down, he exalts another."

What does that mean? God is in charge of your next promotion! Did you know that promotion in your job depended upon God and not your boss? That is exactly what Psalm 75 says! You may think that your job is in the hands of your boss, but it is not. It is in God's hands.

If your job is in God's hands, whom are you going to be trying to please? If we have any sense, we want to please the one who really controls our job!

Please God.

Does that mean we should not be concerned about our earthly boss? That we can lose a lot of stress by slacking off? In Ephesians 6:5-7 Paul tells us what kind of worker God wants us to be.

Ephesians 6:5-7 NIV: Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6.) Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7.) Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men,

In verse 5 he emphasises the concept that we are really working for God. And in verse 6 Paul tells us not to simply be good employees when the boss is looking, but be good employees because from the heart - because God is your boss - and He is looking!

In Sunday School they used to tell us that God sees us everywhere, and the angels have a notepad (must be a notebook computer, but my teachers missed that detail when I was a child), and they are writing down everything we do.

If your boss was sitting by you every minute, what kind of employee would you be? I'll bet a lot less horsing-around would occur.

We may work harder, but I think that if we look at God as our boss, we will work with less stress.

Employers are looking for reliable, faithful employees. When they get one, if they have any brains, they will do a lot to keep one.

Lets talk next about improving our self-image. Did you ever hear children verbally attacking one another? Calling each other names? Denigrating a person based on their country of origin, their skin colour, their poverty or maybe a disability?

Tragically, what we do as children, we may well continue to do, perhaps in a more subtle way, as adults. Clearly the Pharisee of Luke 18 did this - and he wasn't very subtle about it. In verse 11 he said that he was thankful he was not like that tax collector.

The flip side of this is that if men heap you with gold stars, you may, like the Pharisee, have a false sense of security.

If you make pleasing God your first priority, then you do not have to worry about what the other people think. Like Jesus' comment about the tax collector, you can be assured of your position. You will feel secure in what you do, and you will certainly feel less stress.

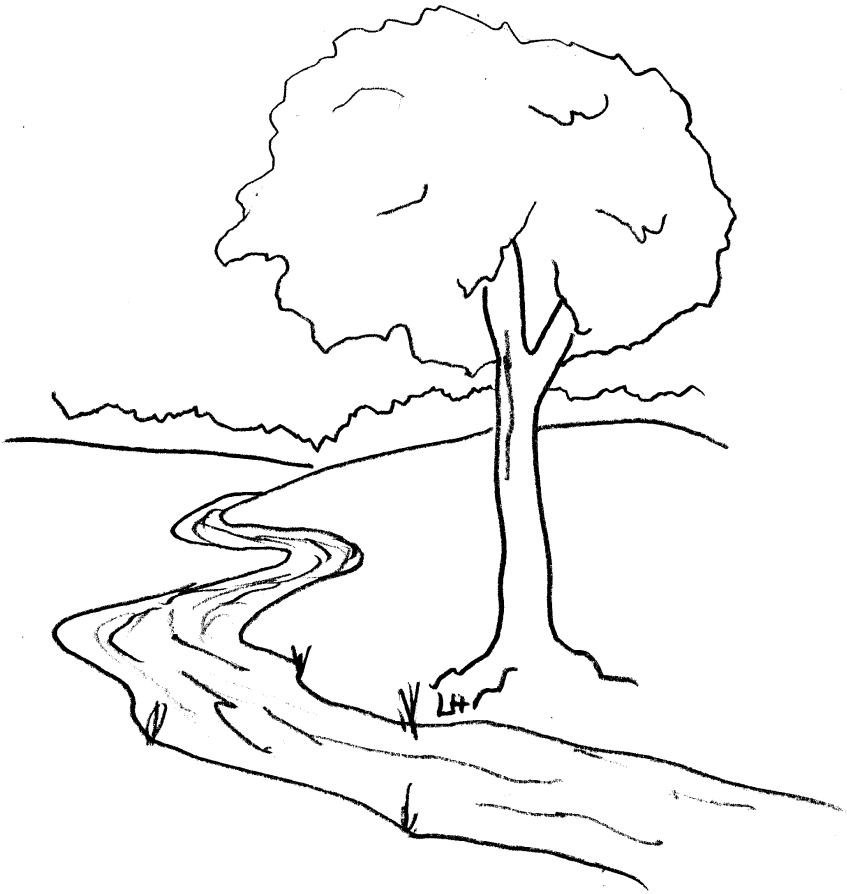
The author Richard Owen Roberts wrote, "The only path to pleasure is in pleasing God". So, let us relieve stress by focusing our thoughts on pleasing God.

Prayer

Go out into the world in peace,
and in Christ's name be —
the humble who make others proud
the poor who have riches to share
the weak who help others be strong
the empty who overflow
with loving kindness.

And the largess of the love of God,
and the treasure
of the grace of Christ Jesus,
and the buoyant health
of the Holy Spirit
will be with you now and forever.
Amen.

(Prayer by Sandy Boyce)



Week 22
Trees Planted by Streams of Water

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (Psalms 1 NRSV).

The person who builds his life on the Word of God is like a tree planted by streams of water. His life is marked by the twin virtues of stability and fruitfulness.

Firstly, stability.

The idea of a "tree planted" by streams of water

speaks of a mighty tree with large branches and deep roots that go far down into the soil. Scientists tell us that when you see a large tree that has been growing for many years, you can be certain that it has a vast unseen root system. Many times the root system will equal or exceed the part of the tree above ground.

This is how Canada's mighty sequoias last for centuries. Their unseen root system gives them stability against the changing forces of nature. In times of winter storms or summer drought, the roots hold the tree in place and ensure that it has enough moisture and nutrients to stay alive.

Dr Ray Pritchard relates the following example: He says, "About seven years ago we cut down a large elm tree on our church property that had been growing for over 100 years. At the time I was told that it was a Chinese elm tree that had been attacked by Japanese beetles carrying Dutch elm disease. We had an international incident in the tree and that's why we had to cut it down!

When the men cut into it, 80 gallons (that's 300 litres) of water gushed out. They later discovered that its root system reached under our west parking

lot all the way to Lake Street, a distance of over 100 feet. No wonder the tree lasted for more than a century."

That's what a good root system will do for you. We know when a tree has good roots by what happens when the storms come.

All the trees look pretty much alike when the sun is shining or a gentle rain is falling, but let a mighty storm with fierce rain and howling winds pass through.

Then the true difference is apparent. The trees with few roots are blown over, but the trees with deep roots are still standing when the storm has passed.

So it is for the child of God. We won't know how good our root system is until the storms of life crash against us. Only then will we discover the strength of our spiritual foundation.

The only way to be ready for the storm is to spend time now delighting in God's Word day by day, meditating on its truth, and building a foundation deep and strong for whatever may come your way.

And secondly, fruitfulness. To speak of "fruit in its season" means that the tree produces fruit that expresses its true inner character.

Spurgeon said, "Good men should aim to have [the fruit of] seasonable virtues. For instance, a forgiving spirit is golden if it displays itself in the moment when an injury is received. It is but silver if it shows itself on speedy reflection. And it is merely lead if it be manifested only after a long time of cooling."

How do you spot an orange tree? By the oranges it produces. And how do you spot an apple tree? Look for the apples. Whatever is on the inside must eventually be seen on the outside.

Applied to the spiritual life, this means that when our roots are deep in the Word, we will be given whatever we need, whenever we need it. If we need love, from the Word of God will come the strength to produce the fruit of love.

If we need a forgiving spirit, from the Word of God will come the strength to forgive. If we need courage, we will produce the fruit of courage. If we

need patience and perseverance, the Word of God will produce it in us.

This sort of supernatural life is available to every believer, but it will only be fully realized over time as we walk and continue to walk with the Lord and to delight in his Word.

That blessedness prospers in all situations. The last two phrases of verse 3 offer wonderful promises to those who delight in God's Word. First, their "leaves do not wither." The phrase pictures a leafy tree that seems like an evergreen because its leaves are in season all year round.

People like this are constantly refreshed by the Word of God, constantly renewed, constantly drawing on new strength for new situations. They are never boring, never dull, never living off yesterday's blessings, but living each day in the strength of the Lord whose mercies are new every morning.

Second, they prosper in all that they do. Don't jump to the conclusion that prosperity refers only or mainly to material success (though that is not excluded). They prosper in the sense that no matter

what happens, they find strength for the day and hope in the midst of the hardest difficulties. They bring forth godly fruit in good times and bad times.

Why? Because they are planted deep in the good soil and their roots reach out to the water of the Word of God. Finding constant nourishment therein, they can face whatever life throws at them.

The thought here is similar to the reference to Jesus in Romans 8:37 which says, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Here in the midst of struggles, sorrow, persecution, famine, distress, nakedness and the sword, those who know Jesus are “more than conquerors” through His divine power. And that triumphant deliverance comes to us in large part through the Word of God.

In this world we may face disappointment, sorrow, rejection, failure, sickness, abandonment, and discouragement. We may hear things about our children we prayed to God never to hear, our dearest friends may desert us, our spouse may leave us, and

we may face an unremitting series of earthly tragedies. Illness, physical weakness, and death itself may visit our door time and again.

Even then, we prosper, we thrive, we survive, we are not destroyed. Sometimes when I ask friends going through hard times how they are doing, the answer comes back, “I’m surviving.” Years ago I foolishly thought that was a wimpy response. Now I see that it is a powerful statement of faith. Sometimes surviving is the same as thriving. Some days to survive is to prosper. That, too, is a kind of prosperity for the people of God.

The trees can teach us many lessons:

1. Grow straight and beautiful. Live a life so you will have a good reputation; do not let any sin cause you to grow crooked and full of knots and gnarls.

2. Be sound of heart. Some beautiful trees are rotten-hearted, hollow-hearted. They are dying trees, they are hypocrites, the lumberjack cuts one down and it cannot be used. Be honest, be true, be sincere, be what you want people to think that you are.

3. Be strong. Do not let any little wind of temptation blow you over. Overcome evil with good. Sometimes the winds topple even live trees in the forest, but God is better to His children than trees. He says, "You shall not be tempted above that ye are able."

4. Keep growing. Last winter was cold, last summer was hot, but every live tree grew a little; it added one more ring to the trunk, a few more twigs to the branches. Do not let trouble keep you from growing in faith; do not let hard times keep you from growing in love; keep growing every year. Be like a tree planted by streams of water.

5. Give help to others. All live trees are of some use: shade, timber, nuts or fruits. Every person can be of some use in the world. Find your work and do it well.

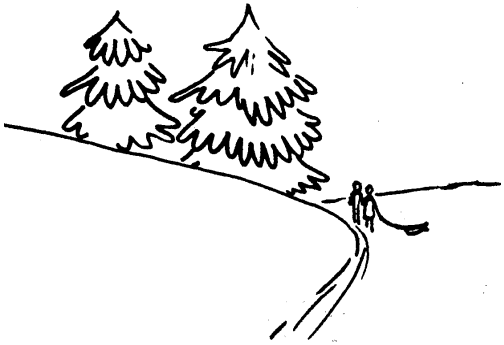
6. God cares for all. For every tree there is a place to grow, plenty of air, light and rain. There is also for you all that you need. God cares for all His children. He never has forgotten one; He will never fail you nor forsake you.

7. Be contented. No tree ever worries, fusses, or grumbles. It may grow in a wilderness or may yet be a part of a city palace. Is your life lonely or sad? Some day Jesus will come to transplant you into the great city of heaven.

Let us close with reading some selections from Psalm 1 again:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper … for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous….



Prayer

Blessed Lord, Please plant us,
root deep, in your river of life.

Help us to choose to drink deeply
from the wellspring of you being
through reading the holy Bible,
opening our hearts to you in prayer
and, where possible,
fellowshipping with like believers.

Thank you for the seasonal fruit that
you ill produce in us as a result.

And may the blessing of God
Almighty be with us personally,
touching, healing
and enriching our lives
in Jesus' name,
Amen.

Week 23
When Moses Messed Up

In an anonymously written humorous piece about possible pastoral candidates, many Bible characters are scrutinised. Here is the comment alongside Moses' name:

Moses: "A modest and meek man, but poor communicator, even stuttering at times. Sometimes blows his stack and acts rashly. Some say he left an earlier position over a murder charge."

According to the record, Moses had three distinct 40-year life stages. Following his weaning he spent the first 40 years living a princely life in Pharaoh's court. His second 40 years from ages 40 to 80 he spent living a peaceful life in the Midian desert. And his final 40 years from ages 80 to 120 was a productive life in the Lord's service. In each of these three stages we see at least one significant occasion when Moses messed-up and we can learn lessons from each of these.

Exodus 33:11 says, "The LORD would speak

to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. . . ". So why would we want to look at these three particular occasions when this man Moses messed up?

Well, firstly Moses' experience reminds us that our God is a gracious God, and just because we "mess up" - doesn't mean that God will put us "on the shelf" - never to be used again.

And secondly, Moses' experience reminds us that no matter how spiritual we may think we are - no matter how intimate with God we might be, none of us are invulnerable to sin.

According to the record. Moses as an infant was rescued from a death decree and spent his childhood in the home of the Pharaoh (the Egyptian equivalent of a king). During those first 40 years, one of Moses' mess-ups is found in Exodus 2:11-14.

It says, "One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Glancing this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the

Egyptian and hid him in the sand. The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, 'Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?' The man said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?'"

Now to understand this as a mess-up we consider that although it's okay to be angry, it's not okay to allow our anger to cause us to sin. How do we deal with anger? We replace anger with the love of God.

Condensing what it says in Colossians 3:5-14, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature . . . You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all [things] such as anger ... and put on love..."

Satan looks at us and sees and reminds us what we do when we're cross. God looks at us and sees and remembers what Jesus did for us on Calvary's Cross.

To further understand the episode in Exodus 2

as a mess-up we look to the New Testament in Acts 7:25 which says, "Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not."

It seems that Moses' mess-up was attempting to fulfil God's will via his own strength and abilities. "Here am I, God. I'm the Prince of Egypt. I will make myself available so you can use me, with all of 'my' skill, and 'my' education, and 'my' power, and 'my' influence to bring your people out of slavery."

And what do we learn from this? God does not 'need' us to fulfil his plan. He may choose to use us, but he does not need us. When He graciously chooses to use us, we must learn to depend increasingly upon Him.

I read in Jeremiah 9:23-24 that it says, "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows [the Lord]"

One of Moses' mess-ups that took place during his second 40 years, was when he made flimsy

excuses at the burning bush. Remember that God commissioned Moses for service while speaking through a bush that was burning but was not consumed by fire.

In Exodus 3:10 God said to Moses, "Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."

Verse 11, "But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"

Why the excuses? It seems that Moses had grown comfortable with his simple and quiet life of shepherding. We're all good at making excuses sometimes, aren't we?

Now there is a lesson here for us to learn, and that is that when God calls us to do His work, it may involve moving out of our 'comfort zone.' This is a critical lesson for us to learn, for we generally love our comfort and hate to be inconvenienced.

Gladys Aylward, a missionary to China of last

century, was forced to flee when the Japanese invaded Yangcheng. But she could not leave her work behind. With only one assistant, she led more than a hundred orphans over the mountains toward Free China.

In their book *'The Hidden Price of Greatness'*, Ray Besson and Ranelda Mack Hunsicker tell what happened. Let me quote what they wrote: "During Gladys's harrowing journey out of war-torn Yangcheng ... she grappled with despair as never before.

After passing a sleepless night, she faced the morning with no hope of reaching safety.

A 13-year-old girl in the group reminded her of their much-loved story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.

'But I am not Moses,' Gladys cried in desperation.

'Of course you aren't,' the girl said, 'but Jehovah is still God!'"

When Gladys and the orphans made it through,

they proved once again that no matter how inadequate, helpless or weak that we feel, God is still God, and we can trust in him.

A Moses mess-up that took place during the latter part of his last 40 years is found recorded in Numbers Chapter 20. The Israelites on their exodus from Egypt were camped at Kadesh in the Desert of Zin, and scripture says that there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron.

As usual, God had a plan. And in Numbers 20 verse 8 we read God saying to Moses, "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water."

Now God knows what speaking with His power can do, after `all didn't He speak all creation into existence?

This instruction to speak to the rock was in contrast to 40 years earlier as recorded in Exodus 17:6 when Moses followed God's instruction to hit a rock and water gushed out.

Numbers 20: 9-11 says, "So Moses took the rod from before the Lord, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, "Listen now, you rebels; shall 'we' bring forth water for you out of this rock? Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank."

'Take the rod' - Moses took the rod. 'Assemble the congregation' - Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly. 'Speak to the rock' - Woops. Moses struck the rock (Instead of speaking to it, not wrongly striking it once, but twice). Yet the people and animals still were able to drink.

In Numbers 20:11-12 God responds by saying to Moses, "Since you hit the rock rather than speaking to it, you will not lead the Jewish people into the Land of Israel"

I learn from this that God and God alone deserves all the credit. He shares his glory with no one. Isaiah 42:8 says "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another."

How often do we take the credit for what God or others have done? How often do we fail to thank God for what He accomplishes through us or through others?

Now so far we have looked at mess-ups, mistakes and misdemeanours. Let us pause to consider the positives.

You and I are not perfect, we often fall short of God's ideal for us. However God is a God of love, compassion and forgiveness.

When we were young, my parents owned a small holiday hut beside Lake Ellesmere in New Zealand. The nearest fresh drinking-water supply was a mile away and consisted of a large pipe that continually gushed crystal-clear ice-cold fresh water day and night.

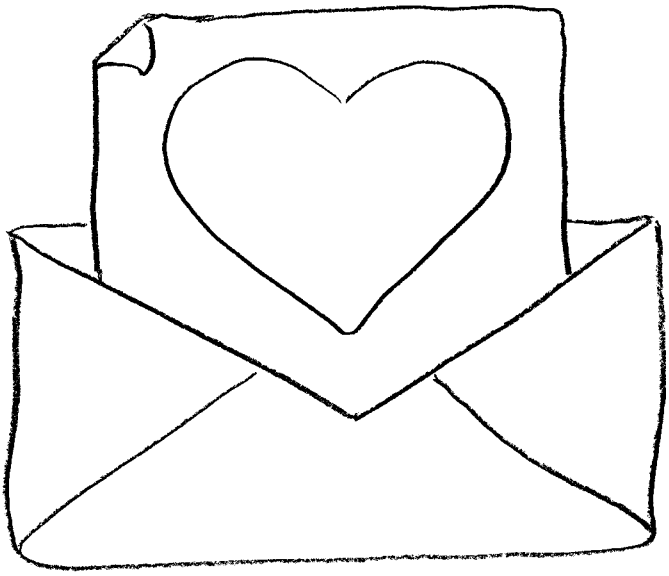
I was told that it had been capped with a pipe over an hundred years prior and was fed by the lake itself as water was filtered and forced through an underground stream, up through the rock and out to the surface. This artesian well was one that could never run dry.

Only a major earthquake draining the lake could ever stem the flow.

God's love is even more reliable than that. Like an artesian well his compassion and love literally gushes out to all who are willing to drink it in.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:38 and 39, "For I am persuaded, that [absolutely nothing] shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Won't we reach out right now and accept the love and forgiveness that the God of the universe is offering us so freely?



Prayer

Thank You Lord, that although we often mess-up, you are a God who continues to love us unconditionally.

In Your Word* you promise that if we confess our sins, You are faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Thank You, Lord.

And we pray this in Jesus' Name,
Amen.

** "If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).*

Week 24
The Two Carpenters

Gregory Elder writes of growing up on the Atlantic Coast of America. He says, "I spent long hours working on intricate sand castles; whole cities would appear beneath my hands. One year, for several days in a row, I was accosted by bullies who smashed my creations. Finally I tried an experiment: I placed cinder blocks, rocks, and chunks of concrete in the base of my castles. Then I built the sand kingdoms on top of the rocks. When the local toughs appeared (and I disappeared), their bare feet suddenly met their match".

Jesus the former carpenter said, "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a

foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it". Matthew 7:24-27

The longest recorded message in Scripture that our Lord preached was the Sermon on the Mount, which concludes with a story of two carpenters. I am not an expert on construction, however I have a few principles that the Lord shares in these verses that will help us in our daily walk and interaction with others.

When we stop to consider this passage, we find it applies to all people. Whether we made our living in construction or not, we are all carpenters. Each day we live we are building something that will one day be evaluated by the Master Carpenter. We must build properly if our structure is to endure.

Let's start by looking at the construction as exposed in verses 24, 26. In these verses Jesus reveals the construction techniques of the two carpenters. He is aware of their efforts and their approach.

Notice first the wise carpenter (verse 24) -

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock. There are a couple of interesting attributes that we need to consider.

Firstly his work — we find that he built his house upon a rock. As we consider the wise carpenter, it would be beneficial to consider what Luke's gospel records about this man. Luke 6:48a - He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock.

There we find that he dug deep. That literally has the idea of digging deep and wide. It is interesting to note that, in that region of the world, it is sometimes necessary to dig as deep as thirty feet to find a solid foundation.

This carpenter would not have had all the modern machinery that one would have access to today. Clearly this was hard work and reveals the effort this carpenter put forth to ensure a solid foundation. He was committed to building his house upon a rock.

We too must ensure that we are willing to put

forth the necessary effort to build our lives upon a solid foundation. I am not talking about working for or earning our salvation, but being committed unto the Lord and seeking Him in every aspect of life.

Many today are seeking an easy route to heaven. They want to go to heaven when they die, but they are unwilling to sacrifice or labour for the Lord while they are alive here. We must dig deep in the faith and lean upon the Lord, not the lure of the world.

Firstly was his work, and now his wisdom (verse 24), I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: This carpenter was wise in his building. There are a couple of details in the text that reveal his wisdom.

Notice the foundation - we know that he dug deep and wide in order to find a solid foundation. He was committed to building his house upon a rock. He wanted a rock-solid foundation that would support the house when the storms of life came.

We too must ensure that we are building our lives and our hopes upon the Rock, Jesus Christ. 1

Corinthians 3:11 says, For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Many today are placing their trust in the things of this world. They are depending upon their hard work and effort to pay off in the end. Our lives must be built upon Christ! So the first thing that revealed his wisdom was the foundation. The second thing that reveals his wisdom is his attitude toward the future.

He built his house upon a rock. He placed his faith and trust in the foundation, more than in the house. He wanted to build a house that would endure. He wanted to make certain his house would endure the storms. He was building something that would last into the future, not something temporary and fragile.

Far too many are building upon the sinking sands of this life. They are placing their faith and trust in things that will not endure. They live their lives hoping that somehow it will all work out in the end.

We must build our lives upon the Lord if there is to be any hope of an eternal future. We do not know what storms may come our way, but if we are built

upon the Rock, we can endure.

In a discussion regarding foundations and the future, Ravi Zacharias shared the following insight: He said, 'I [recently] did a lectureship at Ohio State University. As I was being driven to the lecture, we passed the new Wexner Art Center. The driver said, "This is a new art building for the university. It is a fascinating building designed in the post-modernist view of reality."

The building has no pattern. Staircases go nowhere. Pillars support nothing. The architect designed the building to reflect life. It went nowhere and was mindless and senseless.

I turned to the man describing it and asked, "Did they do the same thing with the foundation?" He laughed. You can't do that with a foundation. You can get away with the infrastructure. You can get away with random thoughts that sound good in defense of a worldview that ultimately doesn't make sense. Once you start tampering with the foundations, you begin to see the serious effects.'

Let's look now to the other carpenter -

described as The Foolish Carpenter (verse 26). There are a couple of attributes we need to consider regarding this carpenter as well.

Notice his work: and every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand. This man built his house upon the sand.

Notice again what Luke's gospel reveals. Luke 6:49, But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth.

He had no foundation at all. He simply built his house on top of the ground. There was no strength in the house, no support, or security. As we will see, all of his labour was in vain because it did not endure.

Isn't that an accurate depiction of so many in our day as well? They are building their lives with no foundation at all. They start out building upon the ideas and promises of this world, but there is no depth, no strength, no support or security in their lives. There is nothing to cling to or hope in when the storms of life rage.

These projects require less effort and make a quick showing, but in the end they will not endure.

Firstly his work, and now his woe; and every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand. This man is likened unto a foolish man.

The Greek word translated foolish in our text gives us our English word "*moron*." Those around him may have thought that he was wise and prudent, saving time and money as he built, but it was all a foolish effort. He depended on his own wisdom, but would eventually find out that his wisdom was lacking.

We must also consider that the foolish carpenter took no thought for the future. He was consumed with the here and now. He wanted to build his house quick, with the least amount of effort, taking no thought for tomorrow.

Our world is filled with those who make the same foolish decisions. They are living life only for today. There is no thought for the future. They are

not concerned with building a life that will be found acceptable in eternity through Christ the Lord. They are only concerned with pleasing themselves and living in the moment. Many have no spiritual foundation, building only upon this earth and the fleeting hope it gives.

We've discussed the construction exposed, let's look now at the calamity endured (verses 25, 27). Jesus also reveals the storms that the carpenters faced.

Notice the severity - each of these carpenters would eventually face a severe storm. The rains would fall, the floods would come, and the winds would blow. Keep in mind that one was built upon a rock (a picture of Christ) and the other was built upon the sand. Each faced a traumatic storm, maybe even the same storm.

Regardless of our foundation, we will all face storms and trials in this life. There will be times when the storms are severe. There will even be times when we will wonder how we will survive.

Facing the storms and adversities of life are common to all people. The Christian is not immune,

and the spiritually lost are not the only ones who face them. Job 14:1 tells us: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble".

First the severity, now the similarity - these storms may not have been exactly the same, but they shared the same characteristics. Each of the carpenters faced driving rains, rising floods, and relentless winds. If not thesame, their storms were very similar.

Living upon this earth, we all face similar trials and storms. We have, everyone of us, endured some very difficult times occasionally. These storms have affected all of us. There is no escape from the trials of life. They will come, and in many ways, they will be similar to the adversities that others face.

The main difference lies in the foundation. The believer has an Anchor that is sure. When the storms come, we can rest in the peace and assurance of Christ our Lord.

First the severity, then the similarity and now the scrutiny - the storms tested the buildings that each of the men had built. They revealed what they were made of, and more importantly, what they were

founded upon.

Notice the contrasts. Matthew 7:25 - And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. The wise carpenter's house did not fall because it was built upon the rock. It endured because of the foundation!

Luke reveals that the storm could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock. Isn't that what we desire? We need to build our lives so that we are secure in Jesus. When the storms come, we will be able to stand in or with Him.

Matthew 7:27 - And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. The foolish carpenter's house fell when the storms came. Luke says that: against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great.

When the storm began to rage in its fury, the house immediately fell. It literally crumbled in the face of the storm. Surely we all want to build lives

that will endure. Those that are not built upon the rock will immediately fall when tested, but those built upon the rock will endure in Christ.

I started by looking at these two carpenters efforts with the construction exposed and the calamity endured. Jesus now gives us the counsel expressed (verses 24, 26). Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: [26] And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand.

These are actually the closing comments to the sermon Jesus preached that day. He speaks of those who hear His words and do His commandments as being wise and those who hear His words and choose not to obey them as being foolish.

He reveals that they are responsible to respond to all that He has taught them in the Sermon on the Mount. "These sayings" speak of the message in its entirety. We must not pick and choose which portions are acceptable, but submit to all of His teaching. I encourage all to read the entire sermon - it is only

three chapters in length - Matthew 5, 6, and 7.

God has given us His Word for our benefit, but it is ultimately up to us to hear and obey. Many today treat God's Word like a buffet. They pick and choose those portions they like and leave the rest.

I pray that we will take the lessons our Lord has taught us and apply each of them to our everyday lives. If we are to build our lives upon the Rock, in such a way that they will endure the storms, we must heed and obey His Word.

Where you are in the journey? Are you building your life upon the solid foundation of Jesus Christ or are you building upon the sinking sands of this life? Only that which is built upon Christ will last. If you have never trusted Christ as your Saviour, I urge you to do so today.

1 Corinthians 3:11 "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ".

Prayer

The Church has one foundation. The individual, you and I, only need one foundation, Jesus Christ our Lord.

As we daily lay the bricks of our lives, sometimes in neat rows, other times higgledy-piggledy, may we be sure of one thing, the only thing and that is that we build on a sure foundation.

Lord, we place our lives on the solid Rock. When storms clouds threaten the skies of our lives with pending storms we know that with your might we can withstand all that life throws at us.

Thank you Jesus for this reassurance.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Week 25
When God Seems Distant

Harry Emerson Fosdick was a national radio personality, a teacher and preacher in the early part of the last century. He once did a sermon explaining his belief in God. He said that when he was a boy, he would look out the window and watch the branches and leaves on the tree move.

He would sense the wind blowing, and he put it together. He concluded that it was the moving of the branches that he could see that caused the movement of the wind that he could not see.

But he explained that when he grew to adulthood, he understood it differently, discovering that it was the wind he could not see that moved the branches that he could see.

Author Leith Anderson, commenting on this, says, "So it is that this great, invisible God is as real as anything else we count to be reality. Invisibility makes him no less real, no less powerful, no less

present. He's like the wind-the wind that blows where it pleases and chooses, the wind that makes things happen. He makes things happen. He is close; he is not distant."

No matter who we are, when we are in pain or when our world seems to be crumbling around us, we may ask, "Where is God?"

There are even times in the life of the Christian, when even though you are walking by faith and there is no known deliberate sin in your life, God seems far away. You pray, but God doesn't seem to answer. You read the Bible, but it does not speak to you. You seek God, but it seems as if He is hiding.

When that happens, you're in good company. King David, the man whom through the Holy Bible God called "a man after My own heart," had that experience. David describes it in Psalm 13.

Out of the depths of his heart David repeats four times the haunting cry, "How long?" There is no indication in these verses that David had deliberately sinned. But his enemy was about to get him.

In spite of David's repeated prayers, God seemed unavailable. Have you ever been there? You desperately call out to God, but He seems to have taken an extended vacation. Psalm 13 tells us what to do when God seems distant.

Psalm 13 falls into three stanzas of two verses each. Verses 1 and 2 outline the problem. Verses 3 and 4 present the petition and verses 5 and 6 conclude with the praise.

In a phrase, Psalm 13 is saying: When God seems distant, we must call to Him and trust in His unfailing love.

At those times when it seems as if God has turned His back, we must deliberately trust the fact that He loves us with an unfailing love, and that He will not forsake us, even though it may seem that way for a while.

Let's examine the three parts of the psalm, starting with the problem that God seems distant.

Psalm 13, verses 1 and 2 read, " How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will

you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

It seemed as if God had forgotten David, had hidden Himself from him, and as if it would last forever. It always seems as if a time of intense trial lasts forever, doesn't it? The hard thing about waiting is that you have to wait! Don't you hate to wait?

An adult son calls his mother: "Hi, Mum - how are you?"

Mum replies: "Not too good. I haven't eaten in 38 days."

Replying with concern, the son asks, "What's the matter, Mum? Are you not feeling well? Have you been to the doctor?"

Mum replies: "It's not that - I just didn't want to have my mouth full of food when you called."

Waiting is hard.

I'm not 100% sure, but if this psalm was written

when David was being pursued by Saul, then David had a lot of time on his hands. He was holed up out in the desolate wilderness of Judah. The hours, days, weeks, and months dragged on as David waited for God to act.

Sometimes it seems as if God moves so slowly! We live in a day that says, "Hurry, hurry, hurry!" But so often God says, "Wait! Wait! Wait!" Most of us can relate to a comment by the New England preacher, Phillips Brooks. Normally, he was a calm man. But one day he was clearly agitated. He paced the floor like a caged lion. A friend asked him, "What's the trouble?" Brooks replied, "The trouble is, I'm in a hurry, but God isn't."

Richard Hendrix wrote, "Second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness, maturity, and genuine spirituality most of us ever encounter."

Have you ever noticed the difference between God's timetable and ours? We think in terms of minutes, hours, and days, but God works in terms of years. That's what David was going through. He had been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel when

he was a teenager. But 1st Samuel chapter 26 tells us that Saul was pursuing him like a bird in the mountains.

David was perhaps now in his late twenties. This had been going on for years! Where was God? Had God forgotten about David?

Perhaps you can relate to that. When God seems distant, it always affects our emotions. David, for example, got to thinking that his enemies were winning.

Saul was still the king. He was enjoying the comforts of the palace, while David was sleeping in caves. What made it worse, Saul was the bad guy! He wasn't seeking the Lord; David was. Saul was trying to kill David without cause, even though David had spared Saul's life.

Didn't God know what was happening? Couldn't God do something? Had He forgotten about David?

Have you ever been there? Perhaps you are there now? You're in an extended time of trial and

you call out to God but He doesn't seem to answer. You try to figure out how to get out of your circumstances, but nothing works. You go from the heights of hope to the depths of despair so many times that your system can't take much more.

Meanwhile, those who aren't following the Lord are living the good life in the palace while you're seeking the Lord from the cave. There are two vital lessons to remember at such a time…

The first lesson is that God has not forgotten you! We read in Hebrews 13:5 - "...[God] Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you'".

But God does seemingly forget some of His choicest servants. Joseph, Paul, David - all of them were shut up in unpleasant circumstances for years during which it seemed that God had forgotten them.

Do you know what was happening during that time? They weren't forgotten because God was building maturity into those men as they learned to trust Him.

Just as it takes years to grow a sturdy oak tree, so it takes years to build a godly character. That's the first lesson.

The second lesson is that there is no such thing as instant godliness. We are bombarded with advertisements for instant coffee, instant cameras, instant loans, instant everything it seems. But there is no instant godliness.

David was anointed as king in his teens. He had a strong faith at that time, as seen in his victory over Goliath. Did God put him on the throne shortly after his Bar Mitzvah at age 12? Through all those years of running from Saul and living in caves, David learned to wait upon God. God was developing His man.

That's how God works. If God has you shut up in some frustrating circumstances; and you have racked your brain trying to figure a way out, but nothing has worked; and you see the godless prospering while you suffer; and it seems like God is far away; hang on! Let God do His perfect work in you. He hasn't forgotten you. Learn to wait on Him.

The second part of Psalm 13 is the petition where we call to the Lord. Verses 3 & 4 read, "Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall."

Do you know why many Christians do not grow to maturity and why they are not used by God in a mighty way? It's because when God seems distant to them, instead of calling out to Him, they just shrug their shoulders, say "Oh, well," and go back into living life as usual.

David didn't do that. When God seemed distant, he called on Him to answer him. Instead of turning from God, he turned to Him. Instead of complaining to men about God, David complained to God about men.

In a time of crisis, you can call out to God to rescue you, not just for your relief, but for God's glory. God delights to honour such prayers.

David was sensitive to the presence of God in his life. If he lost the sense of God's presence, he went

after it with urgency. The test of our faith is not when God's presence is real, when we see God at work in our life.

The authentic test of our faith is when God seems distant. Do we seek Him then? If we seek Him, we will find Him, but if we turn to the world or look for a quick fix for our problems without seeking God, we won't easily find Him. Seek God especially when He seems distant.

Sometimes God seems distant and allows us to go right to the brink, to come to the end of ourselves, so that we learn to trust Him more. Whatever their intensity, all trials are designed to bring us to a deeper trust in the Lord. If we dodge them without learning that lesson, we missed what God had for us. David came to that point of trust. Thus, we see that David's problem led to his petition, which led to his praise:

Psalm 13 concludes with Praise where we choose to trust in God's unfailing love

Verses 5and 6 of Psalm 13 read, "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been

good to me."

David has not yet been delivered, but he trusts in the loving-kindness and unfailing love of God, and a calm assurance comes over him. His heart is filled with joy as he thinks of the deliverance that God will bring about. By faith, David counts God's future deliverance as past and says, "I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me."

Please note that David's circumstances had not changed one bit from the start of the psalm, when he felt confused, depressed, and forsaken by God. David was still hiding in caves; Saul was still on the throne, trying to kill David.

So what changed? David's focus! From focusing on himself and his problems at the start of the psalm, David shifted his thoughts to God's loyal love and salvation. That shift in focus moved him from confusion and depression to joy and praise!

This Hebrew word for trust has the nuance of relying or leaning upon someone or something.

You ask, "Then is God a crutch?" Maybe, for

we're all spiritual cripples! One of the main reasons people do not trust God is that they're too proud to admit their total need. Or they mistakenly think that they must earn God's love.

But His love does not stem from any merit on our part, but only from God's nature. Thus it is pure grace, undeserved on our part. Since God's love stems from His unchanging nature rather than from our feeble effort, we can trust in it.

The famous preacher, Charles Spurgeon, was walking through the English countryside with a friend. He noticed a barn with a weather vane. At the top of the vane were the words, "God is love." Spurgeon remarked that this was an inappropriate place for such a message, because weather vanes are changeable, but God's love is constant.

But Spurgeon's friend disagreed. "You misunderstood the meaning," he said. "That weather vane is stating the truth that no matter which way the wind blows, God is love."

When God seems distant, join David in deliberately trusting in God's unfailing love,

whichever the winds of circumstance are blowing. As David wrote in Psalm 103:11: "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His loving-kindness toward those who fear Him." You can count on it, even when your circumstances seem contrary.

He is only taking you through the difficulty to develop maturity and godly character. "But it's been months! Years!" Yes, that's the way He works.

He builds things to last, and that takes time. But the finished product is so much better in quality than quick imitations that don't develop trust in the living God.

Charles R. Swindoll wrote, "God is no distant deity but a constant reality, a very present help whenever needs occur. So? So live like it."

If you are distant from God because of known sin, the answer is the same: Call out to Him and put your trust in His unfailing love as demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ. He died as your substitute, taking the penalty you deserved.

If you will flee to Him for refuge, He will never

turn you away. Malcolm Muggeridge confessed, "God the Father is both far away and near at hand; his voice is, at once, deafening in its thunderousness, and too still and small to be easily audible."

And in closing, when God seems distant, ponder the words of Cardinal John Henry Newman who lived from 1801 to 1890. He says of the distant scene that one step at a time is enough with God leading. Here are his actual words:

Lead, kindly Light, amid the
encircling gloom
Lead thou me on!
The night is dark,
and I am far from home;
Lead thou me on!
Keep thou my feet;
I do not ask to see
The distant scene;
one step enough for me.

May you reach out, take that one step, and sense the nearness of God as you wait on Him today.

Prayer

Lord, it is hard to wait for Your timing to work in our lives.

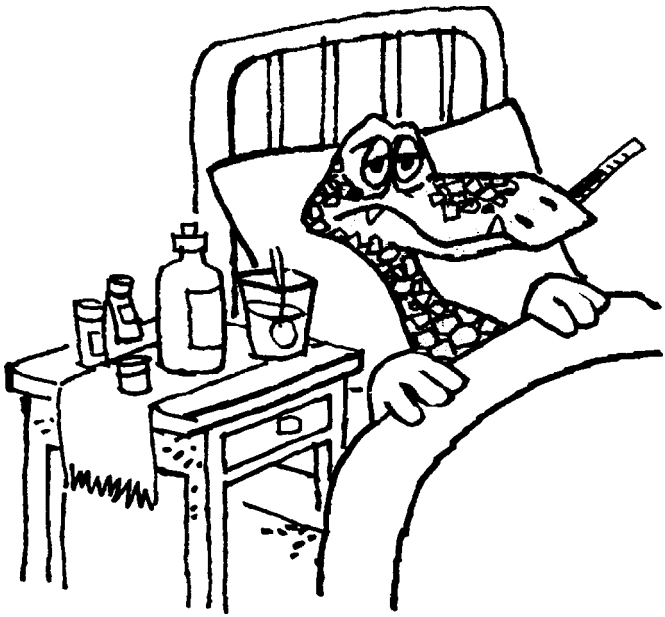
It is harder still when You seem so distant.

But we know, deep down, that when You are not close beside us it is probably because we are the one that moved.

Lord, we place our trust in You, because You know the beginning from the end, You know what is best for us, and You have promised that You will never leave us nor forsake us.

We claim that promise now as we seek to be led and blessed by You.

In Jesus' name, Amen.



Week 26
Where is God in my Pain

As Library Administrator for our local Church Library, I frequently read books and preview DVDs for our library. The other evening my wife and I watched the video version of the biography of the theologian C S Lewis for inclusion in the library.

Lewis had waxed lyrical on suffering but was never really convinced until it hit home by touching his personal life. This is what he said of this experience: "We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accept it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination."

Many people's lives are full of suffering. Some listening to my voice right now are suffering. How do we make sense of this suffering? Why does God allow suffering? Why does he allow the innocent and

righteous to suffer? Where is God when I'm hurting?

We're confronted and offended by misery, grief and pain. We often search for hidden meaning contained within suffering itself, or we seek explanations from other places.

The breadth of suffering in this world raises profound questions about the nature of God, and his involvement in human life. If God is all good, all-powerful, and all loving, then why do the innocent suffer?

Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament provides complete answers to this question. But some answers are given, and these ideas can be explored.

The Bible teaches that we suffer largely because of the fallen, broken, wounded, sinful nature of humanity. Sin has entered the world and brought death, disease, division, and destruction. Human beings rebel against God and his holiness, righteousness, and justice. And, human bodies and the creation are frail. But, in spite of this very real struggle, we are assured that God remains in authority.

We are assured that when Christ returns all things will be eternally restored—and this includes the end of all suffering and evil.

In the mean time, we experience suffering and pain. These affront our sense of the world's fairness. They raise questions about the goodness, the compassion, even the existence of God.

The Old Testament book of Job is one source that Christians and Jews turn to for explanations to human suffering and pain. Job is a stunning ancient text. It helps us engage with both the conceptual problems of suffering and the human, interpersonal, gut-level experiences. The misery of innocent, defenceless, and good people is a very real dilemma.

Job is a righteous man who lives a blameless and upright life; fearing God and shunning evil. In spite of this, he suffers greatly. He loses livestock, friends, property, health, and his sons and daughters. One calamity is added to the next.

Although the book of Job offers no definitive answer to the problem of human misery, the issue is ventilated, and partial answers are offered by Job's

friends. But, in the end we cannot discover from the book any one clear view about what the reason for our own particular suffering may be, nor any comforting statement about the reason for human suffering in general; for the book is entirely about the suffering of one particular and unique individual.

Job reminds us that suffering isn't about divine judgement. The innocent & righteous will and do suffer.

The book of Job doesn't deny that some sufferers deserve suffering occasionally. Yet, it contradicts the idea that this is always the case. Job exemplifies the innocent sufferer, whose innocence is asserted by the story's narrator, the holy God, and himself.

We need to forget those clever answers to the meaning of suffering because Job doesn't portray the suffering of the righteous, innocent, and good as something that's necessarily cleansing, educational, testing, or edifying. The author upholds the goodness of both God and Job. But human will, the laws of nature, human sin, freedom of choice and the brokenness of the world all combine to contribute to

the suffering of the innocent; exonerating God and the sufferer from responsibility. A Hungarian Proverb tells us that “Adam ate the apple and our teeth still ache”.

Yet, even these “clever” explanations don’t heal the wounds nor satisfy the objections of those of us who are suffering. The mistake of Job’s friends was that they offered complicated and erroneous explanations to an innocent sufferer who, in fact, needed comfort, support, and sympathy. He didn’t need their clichéd or “clever” answers.

What I have learned from Job is that God is not predictable, and it is completely acceptable to question God when we are in pain.

In the book, Job is never condemned for questioning God. In desperate anguish he gropes for answers in the dark abyss of his misery. He laments his bitter feelings and grievous calamities. He cries to God for a response.

Job questions God vigorously—not in a logical or consistent manner, but in one motivated by grief and inner turmoil.

The book of Job legitimates our quest for self-understanding and meaning, while at the same time encouraging us to display emotional integrity and candour in our relationships with God and others. It also validates our moments of scepticism in the face of commonly accepted certainties as well as pessimism as a frank response to an implacable experience, and perhaps even cynicism in reaction to unfair abuse from others.

Once Job has aired his criticisms and questions of God, he encounters God's majesty and is overwhelmed that God would even reason with him. In his encounter with God, he finds profound personal meaning, amidst undeserved suffering and ambiguity. God responded to Job's cries of anguish in this encounter. This is because the author of the book of Job believes that God responds to human misery—sometimes incomprehensibly, often unfathomably, but never negligibly.

God responds to Job's questioning. But, he doesn't do it in a manner that would silence through fear, persuade by love, placate with logical explanations, or bribe in order to keep Job silent. Instead, God responds in the divine-human encounter,

allowing Job to glimpse the respective places of God and human beings in the universe.

The book tells us that God allows evil and chaos for a season, but that they are kept in a leash.

So, where is God when it hurts? Here are some responses.

Firstly, God Suffers. The Bible shows us a God who is not distanced from human suffering. God himself suffers. And he suffers greatly. Jesus experienced profound suffering: physical (from hunger, weariness, flogging, crucifixion), emotional (he wept for Lazarus, and he grieved for the fall of his people), and mental and spiritual (such as his agony in the garden and his torment on the Cross). Jesus identifies with innocent sufferers because he himself was an innocent sufferer.

Philip Yancey writes that, “Suffering can never ultimately be meaningless, because God himself has shared it”.

Secondly, God is present in our suffering (and suffering shapes us). Since God is involved in our

suffering, he is able to work through it for our good (even though suffering is never good in itself).

Since God's presence is with us when we suffer, even though he may not be the cause of the suffering, he may use suffering to draw us to himself, develop in us Christian maturity, and to accomplish his purposes

As C.S. Lewis once famously wrote, "God whispers to us in out pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

The choice is ours how we respond to suffering. We can hold on to the promise that God is with us in our suffering and cling to the hope of eternal healing. We can show others compassion in their suffering and refuse to offer sufferers simplistic or clichéd answers. We can pray for healing (which may or may not come through prayer, depending on the will of God) and if appropriate we can change our lifestyles and habits to harmonise them with God's will for us.

The New Testament brings an additional perspective to our understanding of suffering: the

perspective of eternity. Paul wrote, “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

This life is like a drop in the ocean compared with our eternal peace, joy, and wholeness with God. Such thoughts don’t always comfort us when we suffer, or when we’ve lost someone we love. But, at times, such hope does help make the suffering of this life more bearable—and direct our hearts and minds to our eternal hope in Jesus Christ.

Suffering only makes sense in the light of the final chapter—the restoration of all things, at the end of the age, in Jesus Christ.

It is in times such as these that I can truly say, along with Handel and Job in Job 19: “For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth … in my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold [him], and not another.

The Christian humorist Barbara Johnson wrote, “Pain is inevitable for all of us, but misery is optional”. Likewise the singer and songwriter Rodney Crowell

sang, “Pain comes like the weather, but joy is a choice”.

May God’s peace encompass you whenever pain strikes and may He give you the courage to accept his comforting touch.

Prayer

Gracious and caring God, we know what pain feels like and we are comforted that you, too, know what it is like to feel pain. We are so grateful, even in our hurting, that you truly care, not just for humanity as your word assures us, but that you care for each of us individually and lovingly.

If it is your will, please ease our pain and help us not to be a pain to others. Thank you Jesus.

And now we adoringly accept your blessing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Week 27
How to React to Crisis

Let me share with you a well-known story of a certain day on a lake. A story of calm to crisis and from crisis to calm. It is found in Matthew chapter 8, Mark chapter 4 and again in Luke chapter 8.

Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. 24) Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. 25) The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” 26) He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. 27) The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” (Matthew 8:23-27)

Today I wish to share four facts about crises, some good news about crises and then three coping mechanisms.

Let's start with my four facts about crises

Firstly, they are inevitable.

James Russell Lowell wrote, "There is no good in arguing with the inevitable. The only argument available with an east wind is to put on your overcoat."

(James 1:2 NRSV) My brothers and sisters, WHENEVER you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy. *(Emphasis added)*

(John 16:33) These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world YE SHALL HAVE tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. *(Emphasis added)*

Secondly, they are variable.

These variable crises may be situational (Proverbs 1:27 NIV) when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

These variable crises may be relational (Psalms 102:7-8) I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof. 8) All day long my enemies taunt me; those who rail against me use my name as a curse.

And these variable crises may be emotional (Job 30:22) You snatch me up and drive me before the wind; you toss me about in the storm.

Thirdly crises are impartial

"He sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45).

Lord Bowen must have been in a cynical mood when he wrote this little comment on 5:45, "The rain it raineth on the just / And also on the unjust fella: / But chiefly on the just, because / The unjust steals the just's umbrella."

Fourthly crises are unpredictable

(Matthew 8:24) "Without warning a furious storm came up . ."

Henry Kissinger is known to have said, "There cannot be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full."

In 1847 the hymn-writer Henry F Lyte wrote, "Change and decay in all around I see." Change and decay are enemies that most people fear. ... When we are young, change is a treat; but as we grow older,

change becomes a threat.

Now there is some good news about crises, and that is that I can choose my response to crises.

The comedy writer Barbara Johnson wrote, “Pain is inevitable for all of us, but misery is optional.”

Let us make a comparison using snippets from our story of the storm on the lake.

(Matthew 8:25: The response of the disciples “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”

compare this with

(Matthew 8:24: The response of Jesus “But Jesus was sleeping.”

The word Crisis in Chinese is made from two pictorial symbols: the character for danger and the character for opportunity. Whenever we see danger do we also see the opportunity to be freed from it?

Let’s ask Scripture how to face an unexpected crisis.

(Proverbs 3:25-26) Be not afraid of sudden

fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. 26) For the LORD shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken.

Bethany Hamilton was once ranked as the best amateur teen surfer in Hawaii. But one day in October 2003 she lost an arm to a tiger shark while surfing. The story of a beautiful and talented teenager losing an arm to a shark made national news.

However, there is another side to Bethany that kept her from being depressed and sinking into a life of self-pity — she had a relationship with Jesus Christ that transcended the tragedy she experienced.

Soon after the attack, she began to raise money to restore a man's eyesight. While she was visiting New York City, she gave her ski coat to a homeless girl.

Her story, which appeared in USA Today magazine, stated (quote): "As always, Hamilton remains undaunted. She has told her father that if having only one arm proved detrimental to reaching the top in competitive surfing, then she'd see about playing soccer."

Her pastor, Steve Thompson, said, "She's looking forward to the future. She's asking herself, 'How can I show the world I still have a life, that I enjoy my life, and that my life is filled with joy?' She has an underlying trust that God is taking care of her."

I have shared four facts about crises and the possible responses to crisis. Now, finally, here are three coping mechanisms to help us to cope when crisis strikes.

Firstly, refocus on God's closeness.

(Matthew 8:23) "Then (Jesus) got into the boat and His disciples followed Him."

The American writer Joan Marie Arbogast explained that her daughter was terribly anxious the first time she flew in a plane. "What if the plane falls down?" she asked as they boarded. "What's that sound?" she questioned as the engines revved. During take-off she squeezed Joan Marie's hand till the knuckles turned white. However, once they were above the clouds, the girl released her grip and announced, "It's okay now. I'm not afraid. We're above the clouds ... and next to heaven."

So we refocus on God's closeness.

(Isaiah 43:1-2) But now, this is what the LORD says — he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. 2) When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

Secondly, rely on God's grace.

Thomas Guthrie wrote, "As in nature, as in art, so [it is] in grace; it is rough treatment that gives souls, as well as stones, their lustre."

(Mark 4:38) "The disciples said to Him, 'Teacher, don't You CARE if we drown?'"

The only survivor of a shipwreck was washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed feverishly for God to rescue him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming. Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements, and to store his few possessions.

But then one day, after scavenging for food, he arrived home to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up to the sky. The worst had happened; everything was lost. He was stunned with grief and anger. “God, how could you do this to me!” he cried.

Early the next day, however, he was awakened by the sound of a ship that was approaching the island. It had come to rescue him.

“How did you know I was here?” asked the weary man of his rescuers. “We saw your smoke signal,” they replied.

Remember, next time your comfort zone is burning to the ground, rely on God’s grace – it just may be a smoke signal that summons the grace of God.

(Psalm 112:6-9 in the Living Bible) “The (believer) will not be overthrown by evil circumstances. God’s constant care of him will make a deep impression on all who see it. He does not fear bad news, nor live in dread of what may happen. For he is settled in his mind that God will take care of him. That is why he is not afraid but can calmly face

his foes."

And thirdly, remember that God is still in control.

Erwin W. Lutzer wrote, "God's restrictions not only hold us down, but they also hold us up. We will never achieve fulfillment unless he is in control. He did not send his Son to cramp our life-style but to give us a much better one."

(Mark 4:39) He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

Charles R. Swindol wrote, "One of the marks of spiritual maturity is the quiet confidence that God is in control ... without the need to understand why he does what he does."

(Psalm 91:1-5) "Whoever goes to the Lord for safety . and protection . . can say to Him `You are my defender and protector. You are my God; in You I trust. He will keep you safe from all hidden danger . . you need not fear."

James S. Hewett tells us that on a summer day

he took his three-year-old daughter to a kiddy park in Dallas to ride the rides. He put her on a small ride which she insisted on trying even though it was the "scariest."

As she whipped around the corners in the kiddy car, she wrinkled up her face into a terrified cry. James tried to catch her attention, and finally she caught his eye, and he was smiling and shouting, "Hey, this is fun!" When she saw that he was not terrified, but smiling, she also began to laugh. What was once terrifying, became enjoyable—even fun!

Sometimes our Heavenly Father will "put us on some scary rides" in life, not really to terrify us, but to cause us to catch His eye, to teach us that He is in control and we can trust Him.

Nien Cheng, an older Chinese Christian woman, has written a book entitled Life and Death in Shanghai. The author spent six years in a Red Guard prison and was horribly, brutally tortured. She survived the whole thing, living year after year in a bare, damp, dank, dirty cell, hearing the screams of people being beaten.

She tells of watching a small spider one day as it crawled slowly up one of the rust-eroded bars at the window. When it reached the top, suddenly it swung out and descended on a thin silken thread spun from the end of its body. With a leap and a swing, it secured the end of the thread to another bar, and then the spider crawled back along the silken thread to where it started.

Nien Cheng watched the tiny creature at work with increasing fascination. She wondered how it knew exactly where to take the next thread. There was no hesitation, no mistake, no haste. The tiny spider knew its job and carried it out with confidence.

Who had taught the spider to make such a web? she thought. Could it really have acquired the skill through evolution? Or did God create the spider and endow it with the ability to make a web so that it could catch food and perpetuate its species?

She says she knew she had witnessed something extraordinarily beautiful and uplifting. She thanked God for the miracle she had just seen. Mao Zedong and all of his revolutionaries seemed much less menacing, and she felt the renewal of hope and

confidence, for she had seen with this little spider that God was in control.

Prayer

When crises come into our lives, may we have the courage to choose your leading, remembering your closeness, grace and control.

And now may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all, is my prayer in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Sequel: An instant answer to prayer.

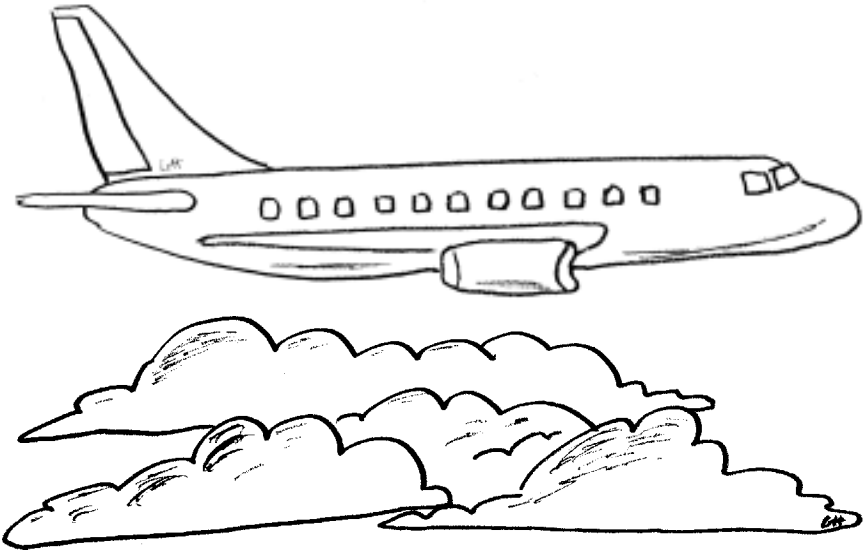
On the 16 February 2020 I was presenting a very similar devotional to ‘How to React to Crisis’ at a Hospital Chapel entitled “Coping With a Personal Crisis”, and as a last-minute thought, I included one of the illustrations from this week’s devotional.

In attendance was Jackie, one of the Hospital Chaplains.

At the end of the programme she shared the following dramatic instant answer to prayer.

This is what she said. “I confess that I was only half-listening while you were speaking this morning as I was praying, ‘Lord I have to travel on an aeroplane soon and my personal crisis is that I’m terrified of the idea of flying. Please may Doctor Lionel say something today to give me comfort? In Jesus Name, Amen.’

Immediately I finished my silent prayer you told the story of the American writer’s daughter in an aeroplane. Thank you for allowing God to answer my prayer!”



Here is the story: *The American writer Joan Marie Arbogast explained that her daughter was terribly anxious the first time she flew in a plane. "What if the plane falls down?" she asked as they boarded. "What's that sound?" she questioned as the engines revved. During take-off she squeezed Joan Marie's hand till the knuckles turned white. However, once they were above the clouds, the girl released her grip and announced, "It's okay now. I'm not afraid. We're above the clouds ... and next to heaven."*

-- Lionel Hartley

Week 28
Sweet Hour of Prayer

Author O. Hallesby said, "The quiet hour of prayer is one of the most favourable opportunities [that God] has in which to speak to us seriously. In quietude and solitude before the face of God our souls can hear better than at any other time."

Here is a familiar poem that I wish to share:

Sweet hour of prayer!
sweet hour of prayer!
that calls me from a world of care,
and bids me at my Father's throne
make all my wants and wishes known.
In seasons of distress and grief,
my soul has often found relief,
and oft escaped the tempter's snare
by thy return, sweet hour of prayer!

Sweet hour of prayer!
sweet hour of prayer!

thy wings shall my petition bear
to him whose truth and faithfulness
engage the waiting soul to bless.
And since he bids me seek his face,
believe his word, and trust his grace,
I'll cast on him my every care,
and wait for thee,
sweet hour of prayer!

Sweet hour of prayer!
sweet hour of prayer!
May I thy consolation share
Till from Mount Pisgah's lofty height
I view my home and take my flight.
In my immortal flesh I'll rise
To size the everlasting prize.
And shout
while passing through the air,
"Farewell, farewell,
sweet hour of prayer!"

The hymn *Sweet Hour of Prayer* is usually attributed to William W. Walford. Walford was blind, but this did not make him useless. On the contrary, as he sat by the fire in his English home in the mid-nineteenth century, his hands kept busy, whittling out

useful objects, such as shoehorns. His mind was active, too. Some say that he owned a small trinket shop.

Called on to preach from time to time in a rural English church in Coleshill, Warwickshire, England, he composed sermons in his head to deliver on Sundays. He memorized a huge amount of the Bible which he quoted verbatim in his sermons. Some of his church folk thought he had memorized the entire Scripture, cover to cover. William also composed lines of verse. And he was known as a man of prayer.

The Reverend Thomas Salmon, a New York native, spent some time in Coleshill, where he became acquainted with William Walford. He tells this tale of what happened one day, while he was visiting the blind pastor:

"...He repeated two or three pieces which he had composed, and having no friend at home to commit them to paper, he had laid them up in the storehouse within. "How will this do?" asked he, as he repeated the following lines, with a complacent smile touched with some light lines of fear lest he subject himself to criticism. I rapidly copied the lines

with my pencil, as he uttered them, and sent them for insertion in the Observer, if [the magazine] should think them worthy of preservation."

The Observer did consider them worth preserving, and they were published on September 13, 1845.

Beyond the fact that he was blind and the few details recorded by Thomas Salmon, we know little of William Walford. But his hymn has touched hundreds of thousands of lives, expressing the genuine joy he found in prayer.

Now I said earlier that The hymn Sweet Hour of Prayer is usually attributed to William W. Walford, but hymnologists have never found "a blind preacher" by that exact name, living at the period of time the hymn is said to have been written, in the village where it is said he lived and preached. The confusion over the identity of the poet has resulted in this hymn even being wrongly attributed to Fanny Crosby in times past.

Many hymnals omit the verse that contains the interesting reference to a Mount Pisgah-the place

where God instructed Moses in Deuteronomy 3:27 to go and merely view the promised land since, because of disobedience, he would never be permitted to enter.

"Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer! May I thy consolation share, till from Mount Pisgah's lofty height I view my home and take my flight: This robe of flesh I'll drop, and rise to seize the everlasting prize, and shout, while passing thru~ the air, "Farewell, farewell, sweet hour of prayer."

Some hymnals omits a verse that I find especially meaningful:

"Sweet hour of prayer!
Sweet hour of prayer!
The joys I feel, the bliss I share,
of those whose anxious spirits burn
with strong desires for thy return!
With such I hasten to the place
where God my Saviour
shows his face,
and gladly take my station there,
and wait for thee,
sweet hour of prayer!"

William Batchelder Bradbury, the composer of the hymn tune that often accompanies these words, wrote it specifically for the text in 1861. And it was then that the poem became a hymn.

Bradbury was born in York, Maine where his father was the leader of a choir. By age fourteen he had mastered every musical instrument available, but never saw an organ or a piano until 1830, when his parents moved to Boston. There he met Dr. Lowell Mason, and by 1834 was known as an organist. In 1840, he began teaching in Brooklyn, New York, where he gained popularity by his free singing-schools, and by his concerts, at which the performers, all children, sometimes numbered 1,000. In 1847 he went to Germany, where he studied harmony, composition, and vocal and instrumental music with the best masters.

In 1854, he started the Bradbury Piano Company, with his brother, Edward G. Bradbury in New York City. William Bradbury is best known as a composer and publisher of a series of musical collections for choirs and schools. He was the author and compiler of fifty-nine books. The first book was published in 1841.

In 1862, Bradbury found the poem "Jesus Loves Me" in a book in which the words were spoken as a comforting poem to a dying child. Along with his tune, Bradbury added his own chorus "Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus Loves me..." After publication the song became one of the most popular Christian hymns in churches around the world.

He composed many hymns including "He Leadeth Me," "Just As I Am, Without One Plea," "Jesus Like A Saviour Lead Us," and the one we are discussing today, "Sweet Hour of Prayer."

(Sing or recite...) Sweet hour of prayer!
Sweet hour of prayer!
That calls me from a world of care,
And bids me at my Father's throne
Make all my wants and wishes known.
In seasons of distress and grief,
My soul has often found relief
And oft escaped the tempter's snare
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer!

Prayer

'Tis the blessèd hour of prayer.
Lord, We have come to You in faith,
Your protection to share, - what a
balm for the weary,
O how sweet to be here!

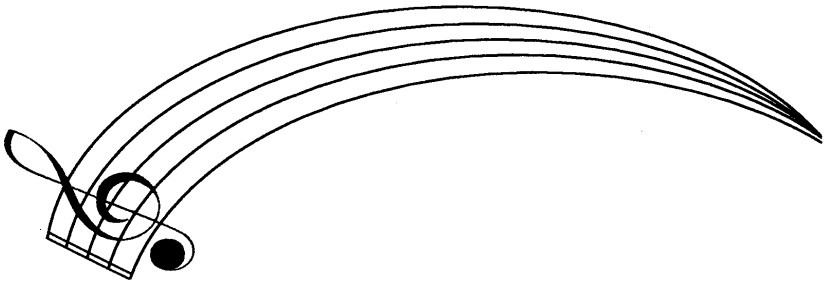
'Tis the blessèd hour of prayer, when
You lovingly draw near, with a tender
compassion Your children to hear.
You've told us we may cast at Your
feet every care.
Thank you Jesus -
O how sweet to be here!

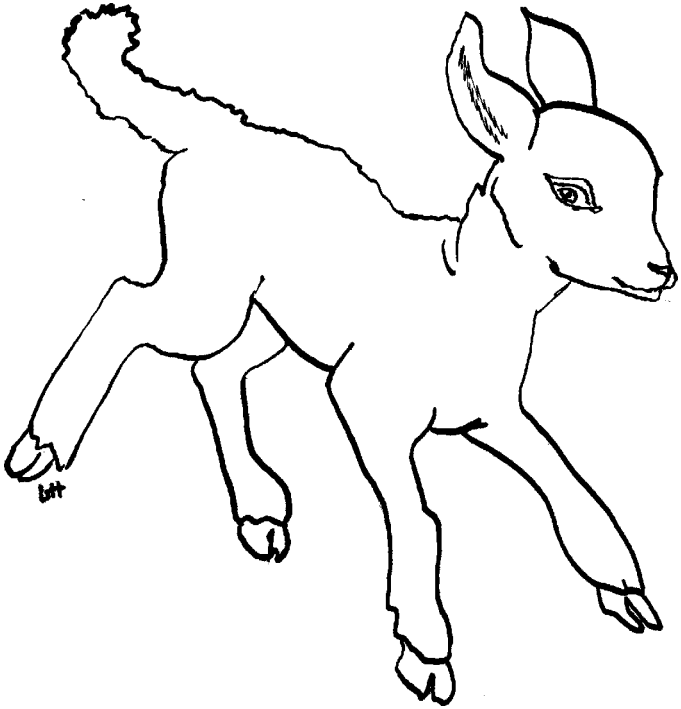
'Tis the blessèd hour of prayer.
Now the tempted and tried all know
that You love us,
so our sorrow we confide;
With Your sympathising heart You
remove every care
Thank you Jesus - O how sweet to be
here!

At the blessèd hour of prayer, trusting
You, we believe that the blessing
we're needing we'll surely receive.
In the fullness of this trust
we shall lose every care.
Thank you Jesus -
O how sweet to be here!

Blessèd hour of prayer,
blessèd hour of prayer,
We thank You who hears us -
O how sweet to be here!

In Your precious name, Jesus,
Amen





O Lamb of God, I come.

Week 29
Just as I Am, I Come

In May 1995, a 34 year old construction worker by the name of Randy Reid, was doing some final welding on top of a nearly completed water tower in one of Chicago's suburbs.

At one point, Randy unhooked his safety belt so he could reach for some pipes. But at that same moment, a metal beam slipped off a nearby crane, and bumped the scaffolding Randy was standing on.

The scaffolding tipped, and Randy lost his balance. He fell 110 feet to the ground below. In landing, he just missed a pile of rocks and construction debris on the ground. Instead he landed face down on a pile of dirt.

A fellow worker saw the whole accident and immediately called 911.

When paramedics arrived, they couldn't believe their eyes. They found Randy completely

conscious, moving, and complaining that he had a sore back.

Even though he went through such a horrendous fall, Randy still maintained his sense of humor. Because as paramedics carried him on a backboard to the ambulance, Randy asked one thing. He said, “Hey guys, be careful, will you? Don’t drop me.”

When he arrived at the hospital and was examined by the doctors, and they discovered that the only injury he suffered was a bruised lung.

Friends, I think sometimes our faith resembles Randy. God protects us from harm in a 110-foot fall, but we’re still nervous about three-foot heights. By that I mean, we have faith that God will save us from eternal separation and death, but we’re afraid that He won’t be able to protect us from the smaller difficulties we are going to face this coming week.

Do you and I really trust God to help us in the little hiccups of life? Do we trust Him to help us right now, where we are? Can we e confident that He hears our prayers and can give us strength?

Listening to a student read the Scripture in seminary chapel, Joseph Sittler, now blind, heard something he'd never heard before. It was from the 23rd. Psalm. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

Later, Sittler said, "The text does not speak of the valley of death but the valley of the shadow of death. There is a difference. ... The wonderful truth ... is that God is with us now."

Please know for certain that it is not simply that God will be with us at the end of our earthly life but it is that God will walk with us through all of life, a life over which gloom sometimes casts its shadow."

So, how can we know that God will care for us? How can I know that God is concerned about insignificant itty-bitty me? How can we be unwaveringly sure that God cares about us and where we are?

There's a interesting story about a Chicago bank that once asked for a letter of recommendation

on a young Bostonian being considered for employment. The Boston investment house could not say enough about the young man. His father they wrote, was a Cabot; his mother was a Lowell. Further back was a happy blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and others of Boston's finest families. His recommendation was given without hesitation.

Several days later, the Chicago bank sent a note saying the information supplied was altogether inadequate. It read: "We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work."

God is not a respecter of persons but accepts those from every family, nation, and race who fear him and work for his Kingdom. Our petitions move Him more than our pedigree does. His love motivates Him more than our knowledge of Him. It is not our family's good name but the name of God's Son that is held up in high regard.

And God doesn't dislike you for who you are any more than he doesn't dislike you for who you aren't. When we turn our face toward God we find that he doesn't dislike us at all. In fact He loves us so much that He gave His only begotten Son, that

whosoever believes in Him – that is, believes in the Son – shall not perish but shall have eternal life.

There is a story that you may have heard before that is told in many different versions that I wonder about its truthfulness, however it does carry an important reminder of the concern God has for you and me.

Here's one version: A wealthy man and his son loved to collect rare works of art. They had everything of significance in their collection, from Picasso to Raphael. They would often sit together and admire the great works of art.

When the Vietnam conflict broke out, the son went to war. He was very courageous and died in battle while rescuing another soldier. The father was notified and grieved deeply for his only son.

About a month later, just before Christmas, there was a knock at the door. A young man stood at the door with a large package in his hands.

He said, 'Sir, you don't know me, but I am the soldier for whom your son gave his life. He saved

many lives that day, and he was carrying me to safety when a bullet struck him in the heart and he died instantly. He had often talked about you, and your love for art.' The young man held out this package. 'I know this isn't much. I'm not really a great artist, but I think your son would have wanted you to have this.'

The father opened the package. It was a simple amateurish portrait of his son, painted by the young man. He stared in awe at the way the soldier had captured the personality of his son in the painting. The father was so drawn to the eyes that his own eyes welled up with tears. He thanked the young man and offered to pay him for the picture. 'Oh, no sir, I could never repay what your son did for me. It's a gift.'

The father hung the portrait over his mantle. Every time visitors came to his home he took them to see the amateurish portrait of his son before he showed them any of the other great works he had collected.

The man died a few months later. There was to be a great auction of his paintings. Many influential people gathered, excited over seeing the great paintings and having an opportunity to purchase one for their collection.

On the platform sat the painting of the son. The auctioneer pounded his gavel. ‘We will start the bidding with this picture of the son. Who will bid for this picture?’

There was silence. Then a voice in the back of the room shouted, ‘We want to see the famous paintings. Skip this one.’ But the auctioneer persisted. ‘Will somebody bid for this painting? Who will start the bidding? $100, $200?’

Another voice angrily. ‘We didn’t come to see this painting. We came to see the Van Gogh’s, the Rembrandts. Get on with the real bids!’ But still the auctioneer continued. ‘The son! The son! Who’ll take the son?’

Finally, a voice came from the very back of the room. It was the long-time gardener of the man and his son. ‘I’ll give $10 for the painting..’ Being a poor man, it was all he could afford.

‘We have $10, who will bid $20?’ ‘Give it to him for $10. Let’s see the masters.’ The crowd was becoming angry. They didn’t want the picture of the son. They wanted the more worthy investments for

their collections.

The auctioneer pounded the gavel. ‘Going once, twice, SOLD for $10!’ A man sitting on the second row shouted, ‘Now let’s get on with the collection!’ The auctioneer laid down his gavel. ‘I’m sorry, the auction is over.’

‘What about the paintings?’

‘I am sorry. When I was called to conduct this auction, I was told of a secret stipulation in the will. I was not allowed to reveal that stipulation until this time. Only the painting of the son would be auctioned. Whoever bought that painting would inherit the entire estate, including the paintings. The man who took the son gets everything!’

God gave His son over 2,000 years ago to die on the cross. Much like the auctioneer, His message today is: ‘The son, the son, who’ll take the son?’ Because, you see, whoever takes the Son gets everything.

For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall

not perish but shall have eternal life.

And we don't have to be perfect in order for us to come to God.

Gigi Graham Tchividjian, a Christian woman with a special ministry to other women wrote the following comforting thought: She says, "For years I never felt I measured up to all I thought the Lord wanted me to be, or all I thought I should be. Satan convinced me that since I wasn't "perfect," I had no right to minister to others. Then one day, my children brought me a bouquet of flowers they had picked. I hugged each child with joy. As I tried to arrange the flowers in a vase, I discovered my children had picked no stems, just blossoms. I laughed—I had been blessed with their gift of love, however imperfect. It was then I realized we don't have to be perfect to be a blessing. We are asked only to be real, trusting in Christ's perfection to cover our imperfection."

In 1834, an elderly man asked 45-year-old Charlotte Elliott if she were a Christian; she felt insulted, and told him to mind his own affairs. But after the man left, she could not get the question off her mind, and she went back to ask the man how to

find Christ. He told her to come just as she was. She did, and wrote this poem:

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, and waiting not
to rid my soul of one dark blot,
to thee whose blood can cleanse each
spot,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings within and fears without,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
sight, riches, healing of the mind,
yea, all I need in thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,

wilt welcome, pardon,
cleanse, relieve;
because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, thy love I own
hath broken every barrier down;
now, to be thine, and thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Around the year AD 96, Clement the First wrote a prayer that we can surely apply ourselves. He wrote, “We ask you, Master, be our helper and defender. Rescue those of our number in distress; raise up the fallen; assist the needy; heal the sick; turn back those of your people who stray; feed the hungry; release our captives; revive the weak; encourage those who lose heart.”

Jesus bids us to come to Him. He is no respecter of persons. God really wants us to come to Him. He wants to accept usjust as we are. Can we say to Him, Just as I am, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

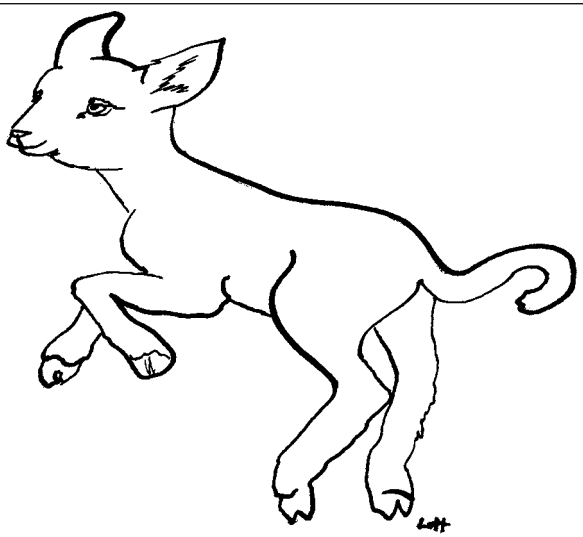
God wants you, loves you and desires you to come just as you are to Him to receive a blessing.

Prayer

Help us to know your love, to experience your joy and to see the world and people around us, as you do.

May we take a step closer to you each day to see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly, day by day.

In Jesus' name, Amen.



Week 30
Just As I Am, Without One Plea

Charlotte Elliott knew what it was like to struggle. For many years she struggled spiritually, unable to find a way to God, and for most of her life she struggled physically with a long term, degenerative condition that left her weak, depressed and bed bound.

For a while she suffered from a sense of utter hopelessness. But from this dark place, she found a hope that brought light to her life and opened up a pathway to God that depended not on her own strength but on His. And so, in thankfulness for all that she had received from God, she wrote a beautiful hymn, my own personal favourite, first published in 1836.

Listen to these hymn words:

"Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come."

Life had actually started fairly comfortably for Charlotte. She was born into a wealthy, devout and influential family in 1789.

Her grandfather was Henry Venn, a founder of what was known as the Clapham Sect, which was a group of Christian philanthropists who fought for social change in the 18th century and who's most famous member was William Wilberforce who led the movement for the abolition of the slave trade.

Charlotte Elliott spent her first 32 years in Clapham. She was highly educated and had a passion for music and art, and despite her devout and serious upbringing, she became popular in the social circles of the day and was well known for writing humorous verse.

Then in 1821 she developed a severe illness that was to affect her for the rest of her life. Forced to withdraw from the social whirl, she began to struggle with her faith in God. As she looked at herself, all she could see was what was wrong with her life, she felt completely unworthy of God's love and unable to approach Him for help.

Listen to these hymn words:

Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings within and fears without,
O Lamb of God, I come.

She tried turning to the local church for support but was told that she just needed to pray harder, study the bible more, and behave more nobly. Not surprisingly that advice didn't help her very much.

Then one day, Cesar Malan, a Swiss clergyman who was visiting her father, asked her whether she felt at peace with God. Her immediate reaction was one of anger, she fled in a sulk and refused to speak to him for the rest of the day.

But a few days later she apologised and asked him what she needed to do to approach God. His answer was simple. He said "Come, just as you are".

She felt a weight lifted from her and from that day she committed her life to God. That didn't mean everything immediately became easy, she continued to struggle with illness for the rest of her life, but within those struggles she found a hope and comfort

in God that she expressed in her writing.

She published over 150 hymns and poems of which ‘Just As I Am’ is her most loved. The late evangelist Billy Graham used this hymn in almost every one of his evangelistic meetings, calling it "the strongest possible Biblical basis for the call of Christ", whilst the hymn historian Kenneth Osbeck wrote that ‘Just As I Am’ has "touched more hearts and influenced more people for Christ than any other song ever written”

Listen to these hymn words:

“Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.”

What Charlotte Elliott had understood is that God doesn’t require anything of us, except honesty. To approach God and be accepted by Him, we don’t need to pretend to be anything we are not, we don’t need to say special words, we don’t need to pilgrim to special places, we don’t need to perform special ceremonies, we don’t need to know lots about God. We can still have doubts, we can still have fears. All

we need to do is to come as we are and be honest about that.

That was Charlotte's experience although she remained ill for the rest of her life and in later years was unable to leave the house. Yet she remained positive and upbeat, grateful that God continued to love and accept her just as she was. Unable to attend church she wrote "My Bible is my church. It is always open, and there is my High Priest ever waiting to receive me… all I can want I find there".

Listen to these hymn words:

"Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
sight, riches, healing of the mind,
yea, all I need in thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come."

She also continued to publish poems and hymns until shortly before her death in 1871 aged 82.

Many of us may find ourselves in a similar position to Charlotte. We may feel we are not good enough for God because of all the things we have done wrong, or we may struggle with doubts and fears,

that leave God feeling distant and unfriendly.

Some of us may even have been given the same advice as Charlotte, to just pray more and to try harder to be a better person. And if you're in that position, you've probably found that advice as unhelpful as Charlotte did.

The wonderful, good news of Christianity, is there is nothing we can do to persuade God to love and accept us. He already does. In fact, because everything has already been done by Jesus, we don't have to do anything other than to humbly and honestly accept the wonderful gift of life, love and hope that Jesus offers you and me.

Listen to these hymn words:

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
wilt welcome, pardon,
cleanse, relieve;
because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Jesus simply invites us to come as we are and to keep coming. This is true at the beginning of our journey and true throughout our whole life. If we mess

up and do things wrong, we can still come to God as we are. If we have doubts, fears or questions, we can still come to God even though they remain unresolved,

Listen to these hymn words:

Just as I am, thy love I own,
hath broken every barrier down;
now to be thine, and thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come.

If you have not talked to God for years, and perhaps even turned your back on him, you can still always return and come back to him just as you are. Charlotte Elliot continued to have stages of struggle throughout her life. She suffered from bouts of depression and hopelessness, and yet she always knew she could continue to come to God, just as she was, and He would accept and love her regardless.

She knew there is no point in hiding depression or doubts, fears or anger from God - it's not as if He doesn't already know about them – but she also knew that even with them she could approach God confidently, absolutely certain that, as it says in her hymn, God would always welcome her, pardon her,

cleanse her and relieve her. In the same way, you need never worry that God will reject you, because He never, ever will.

Listen to these hymn words: “Just as I am, and waiting not, to rid my soul of one dark blot, to thee whose blood can cleanse each spot, O Lamb of God, I come.”

But there will be some of us listening today, who already know this very well. We may have experienced many years of knowing the reality of God’s welcome and forgiveness and we are confident that we are securely held in his hand. Well, for us I believe there is a further challenge in this hymn and in the life of Charlotte Elliot - and that is to learn to live in gratitude and joy.

The Australian novelist Morris West once noted that as we reach a certain stage in our lives, we need only have 3 phrases in our spiritual vocabulary: Thank you, Thank you and Thank you.

Charlotte Elliott had seen and experienced the undeserved generosity of God’s love and I wish for each of us is that we too would see and experience

the same, so that we too can live lives that are informed by, and soaked in, gratitude to God.

And if gratitude for what God has done for us forms our motivation to serve and support others, then we will be taking a big step on our journey to become more like God.

Once we realise that everything is a gift from God, then giving it away becomes easier. To quote Ronald Rolheiser “If our love and service of others does not begin in gratitude then we will end up carrying other peoples’ crosses and sending them the bill”

And finally, Charlotte Elliott reminds us that gratitude also leads to joy. The highest compliment we can give the giver of any gift, is to thoroughly enjoy their gift. God has given us so much and wants us to enjoy it. As we come to God just as we are, offering him nothing and receiving from him everything, the relationship that is built is not defined by guilt but by love, and love drives out fear and has no room for guilt. We are just left with gratitude and joy. That is what Charlotte Elliot experienced, and that is my prayer for you.

Prayer

Dear Lord, Thank you that I can come to you just as I am.

That I don't need special words, I don't need to understand everything about you, that I can still have questions and doubts and that I can still have done things wrong.

That whatever place I am in, you still delight in me coming and in you I can find refuge, forgiveness, love and acceptance.

Thank you Father, I am truly grateful for your unconditional love poured on me.

Help me now to accept it, and help me to live a life of gratitude for all that you have done for me.

In Jesus' Name, Amen

Week 31
Biblical Joy

On June 6, 1981, Doug Whitt and his bride, Sylvia, were escorted to their hotel's fancy bridal suite in the wee small hours of the morning. In the room they saw a sofa, chairs, and table, but where was the bed?

Then they discovered the sofa was a hide-a-bed, with a lumpy mattress and sagging springs. They spent a fitful night and woke up in the morning with sore backs.

The new husband went to the hotel desk and gave the management a tongue-lashing.

"I believe that you sought your joy in the wrong place." said the clerk, and then he asked, "Did you open the door in the room?"

Doug went back to the room. He opened the door to what they had thought was a wardrobe. There, complete with fruit baskets and chocolates, was a

beautifully decorated bedroom.

People have pursued joy in every avenue imaginable. Some have successfully found it while others have not. Perhaps it would be easier to describe where joy cannot be found:

Joy cannot be found in Unbelief - Voltaire was an infidel of the most pronounced type. He wrote: "I wish I had never been born."

Joy cannot be found in Pleasure - Lord Byron lived a life of pleasure if anyone did. He wrote: "The worm, the canker, and grief are mine alone."

Joy cannot be found in Money - Jay Gould, the American millionaire, had plenty of that. When dying, he said: "I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth."

Joy cannot be found in Position and Fame - Lord Beaconsfield enjoyed more than his share of both. He wrote: "Youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; old age a regret."

Joy cannot be found in Military Glory -

Alexander the Great conquered the known world in his day. Having done so, he wept in his tent, lamenting, "There are no more worlds to conquer."

Marie Ebner-Eschenbach, it seems, confused joy with happiness, when she wrote, "How happy are the pessimists! What joy is theirs when they have proved there is no joy?"

Samuel Dickey Gordon tells us that, "Joy is distinctly a Christian word and a Christian thing. It is the reverse of happiness. Happiness is the result of what happens of an agreeable sort. Joy has its springs deep down inside. And that spring never runs dry, no matter what happens".

Tim Hansel wrote, "Happiness is a feeling. Joy is an attitude. A posture. A position. A place".

Kirby Page insists that, "The word joy is too great and grand to be confused with the superficial things we call happiness".

DL Moody preached, "Happiness is caused by things that happen around me, and circumstances will mar it; but joy flows right on through trouble; joy

flows on through the dark; joy flows in the night as well as in the day; joy flows all through persecution and opposition. It is an unceasing fountain bubbling up in the heart; a secret spring the world can't see and doesn't know anything about".

Where then is real joy found? How can a Christian have joy, not only in everyday life, but also in difficult times?

In 1882, George Matheson wrote, "O Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee; I trace the rainbow thru~ the rain, and feel the promise is not vain, that morn shall tearless be."

Moody elsewhere said: "The Lord gives his people perpetual joy when they walk in obedience to him".

SD Gordon says that, "Only Jesus gives that joy. He had joy, singing its music within, even under the shadow of the cross.

Reading from the Holy Bible at Philippians Chapter 4, Verses 4 and 5, "Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be

known unto all men. The Lord is at hand."

Paul's direction is to rejoice 'in the Lord'. When our joy depends on humans, we have the problem of changes in their mood. When our joy comes from God, we have an unchanging Father who continually loves and cares for us. Paul had a reason to rejoice - his relationship with God. So do we.

Billy Sunday wrote, "If you have no joy in your religion, there's a leak in your Christianity somewhere."

Let's look at an example from the Gospels.

Luke 15:3-6, "And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost."

The shepherd is calling for a party because a sorrow shared halves the sorrow, while a joy shared

is double the joy.

Verse 7, "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance".

Pastor Raleigh Washington wrote, "If the angels in heaven rejoice and shout when a person gives his life to Christ, why should we be denied the same joy?"

A rhetorical question for you to contemplate: If you were the lost sheep, how would you feel about being found?

If we compare the happiness of the sheep with the happiness of the shepherd we can see who should be happier. The shepherd has 99 other sheep. For him, that lost sheep is one percent of his concern. For the sheep itself, its own welfare is 100% of its concern. The sheep should be one hundred times happier than the shepherd.

If we allow that thought to play into our joy in the Lord, then the mere fact that God saved us from

eternal death and forgave our ugly sins should be a source for great joy.

Following God's rules is often the very thing to help to keep us out of unnecessary trouble. However, when we do get into trouble, the knowledge that Jesus has defeated sin becomes our source of both joy and hope.

The author of the hymn 'Amazing Grace', John Newton, credited his wife with being the inspiration that enabled him to leave the slave trading in Africa and find salvation in Jesus Christ. They were married for forty years.

When she died Newton preached on the text from Habakkuk 3:17: "Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines ... yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour."

Calvin Miller wrote, "God ... does not lavish his children with a jolly discipleship so that they may swim in spiritual ecstasy between conversion and death. God is a giver, but he does not give happiness. He gives redemption, meaning, security, love, victory,

and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And happiness is our response to his gifts".

In Acts 2:28 we read, "Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance". The NIV reads, "You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence".

We are told here that God's presence brings us joy. We can come into the presence of God because the Holy Spirit, God's spirit, can be everywhere. This is what allows us to live in the presence of God.

This text in Acts 2:28 was quoting David in Psalm 16:11 and links God's presence and knowing, with following "the paths of life", another name for the Bible.

Would you like more joy in your life? I'm sure you would. We can increase our joy by asking the Holy Spirit to come into our life and lead our thoughts and actions into obedience to God.

Pastor Joel Gregory said, "It's an unusual thing that in history many who have the least to thank God

about, thank him the most".

In 1636 during the Thirty Years War (one of the worst wars in the history of mankind in terms of the sheer number of deaths, epidemics and economic results) there was a godly pastor whose name was Martin Rinkert.

In that single year, 1636, Martin Rinkert conducted funerals for 5,000 people in his parish, about fifteen a day. He lived with the worst that life could do.

But in the middle of that time, he wrote a table grace for his children, a song of thanksgiving. I preach at many churches throughout the year, however if I'd spent the year holding 5,000 funerals of the people in my congregations, could I write for my children a song of thanksgiving?

Here's what Rinkert wrote: "Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices; who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us, with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us; and keep us still in grace, and guide us when perplexed; and free us from all ills, in this world and the next.

Prayer

May the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God.

All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given; the Son, and him who reigns with them in highest heaven; the one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore; for thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

Amen.

Week 32
When God Says No

Pastor Raymond Clubb tells us that a little four-year-old girl noticed that her daddy always bowed his head just before it was time for him to step into the pulpit.

One day she asked, “Daddy, why do you always bow your head just before you get up to preach?”

Her preacher father answered, “Honey, I bow my head and ask God to help me to preach a good sermon.”

With all the innocence of childhood, the little girl said, “Daddy, why doesn’t God answer your prayer?”

Today I want to look at seemingly unanswered prayer.

Let me set a foundation for all I am going to

say.

In the New Testament in James 1:5 we read, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."

And in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 33:3, "Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not."

In His Word, God encourages us to pray to Him and also for us to expect that He will answer them, warning us that there is much we do not know.

Yet there are times when God says 'no' to our prayer or request. A Danish proverb says *"Nej" er også et svar* in English this would be: *"No" is also an answer.*

Of course there can be negative consequences to this:

A number of years ago I read the autobiography of the atheistic Dr Arthur E. Hertzler entitled, 'The Horse and Buggy Doctor' Let me share with you about the faith of his childhood:

"When I was eleven I started to plough corn. At twelve I took my regular place ploughing ten hours a day. I had for my team an old mare and her cantankerous colt. This added to my labours because the colt wanted to go every place but straight down the row, and watching him and the plough also doubled my labour. Tall and frail of body, I am still haunted by these long cruel days. I can say with Horace Mann that I was rocked in the cradle of toil and she rocked me too hard.

At this time came an experience that left me changed. Toward the end of a long, hot day my tired muscles became so painful it seemed that I could not take another step. I knelt beside the plough and prayed for strength to finish the day. It didn't do a bit of good. Some-how the abstract teaching of Sunday school when subjected to a concrete test had failed again. I felt that I had been fooled."

Out of 29 of the most prominent prayers of the Bible where the answer was 'no', over half (17) of the no's to prayers, were because of sin in that individual or in the people as a whole. The other reason for God's prayer request denial in the remaining dozen prayers, was it was not God's will

for that request to be answered as the prayer desired or that God would be glorified more by saying 'no'.

Sometimes God's 'no' is contained within his silence - when God seems not to answer at all… God's silence in not answering is always for our best interest. Advice from Meghann, age 13, "When your mom is mad and asks, 'Do I look stupid?' It is best not to answer her."

Let's look at a few biblical examples and draw out a lesson from each.

Lesson 1. 1 Samuel 14:37 "And Saul asked counsel of God, Shall I go down after the Philistines? wilt thou deliver them into the hand of Israel? But he answered him not that day."

King Saul had pronounced a curse on any of his army who ate before evening. Jonathan, unaware of the curse, had eaten. Saul prayed for guidance but God did not answer him.

The lesson for us is we should be very careful about making vows. Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 says, "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for

he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?"

Lesson 2. 1 Samuel 28:6-7 - "And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets. Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and inquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at Endor."

King Saul prayed for help and guidance. Saul had removed himself so far from God that He no longer was able to answer Saul's prayers without violating Saul's freedom-of-choice. Saul then sought an answer through a medium, this was a clear sin on his part.

Lesson 3. 2 Samuel 12:13, 14 - " And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath

put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. 14 Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die".

Eric Braithewaite, the author of "To Sir With Love" and later to become the Guyanese ambassador to the United Nations, tells in His book "Reluctant Neighbours", of a time when his young daughter was dying. He pleaded with God to save her life and God did not. He concluded that a God who could allow the death of an innocent young girl was not a desirable God and he gave God away.

King David prayed for the life of his son. The son died because of David's sin with Bathsheba. Not only did David know it, he accepted the lesson that is also for us, and that is that sin has its consequences.

However, sin was not the only reason God said 'no' to a prayer request. Sometimes, He said 'no' because it was not His will to answer 'yes' to that request.

Lesson 4. 1 Kings 19:4 - "But he himself [That's Elijah] went a day's journey into the

wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers."

And 2 Kings 2:11 - "And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven."

Elijah prayed that he might die. God had much more work for Elijah to do so it was not in God's will for Elijah to die at that time. Even in the end Elijah didn't die as he was caught up into heaven by a whirlwind.

Lesson 5. Jonah 4:3 – Jonah is speaking: "Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live".

Jonah prayed that God would take his life as it was better to die than to live. God does not answer this type of prayer for there is a time to die and we must wait for God's timing not ours. Also, Jonah had yet to accomplish the work God sent him to do.

Lesson 6. Jeremiah 21:2 - King Zedekiah says, "Inquire, I pray thee, of the LORD for us; for Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon maketh war against us; if so be that the LORD will deal with us according to all his wondrous works, that he may go up from us."

King Zedekiah prayed for help in defeating Nebuchadnezzar. God's answered that He would not help because of the many sins of Israel.

Lesson 7. Mark 10:35-38, 40 - "James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come unto him, saying, Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire. And he said unto them, What would ye that I should do for you? They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory. But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: … to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared."

The disciples James and John with their mother requested the highest rank in the kingdom Jesus was to establish. Jesus' answer was that this position was

not His to give. But, they first were to be servants of one another before greatness would be given them.

Lesson 8. Jesus prayed, “May this cup be taken from me.” He also prayed, “Your will be done.”

It was the Father’s will that Jesus drink the cup of suffering for the sins of the world in order that you and I could be saved.

Lesson 9. 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 - “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. 8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee.”

Paul prayed that his ‘thorn in the flesh’ be removed. Paul’s thorn was not removed, so that Christ would be glorified, rather than Paul, and to keep the preacher from becoming proud.

God as our Heavenly Father wants to give his children those things or circumstances that will be

for their good and which will glorify Him. Matthew 7:11 reads, “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?”

He desires that we pray at all times to Him and expect an answer from Him. Hebrews 11:6 says, “… he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him”.

However, He may say no to our request if His purpose and His will be better served in another way to glorify His name and be a witness to others.

William Culbertson gives us this wonderful advice, “Keep praying, but be thankful that God’s answers are wiser than your prayers”.

Prayer

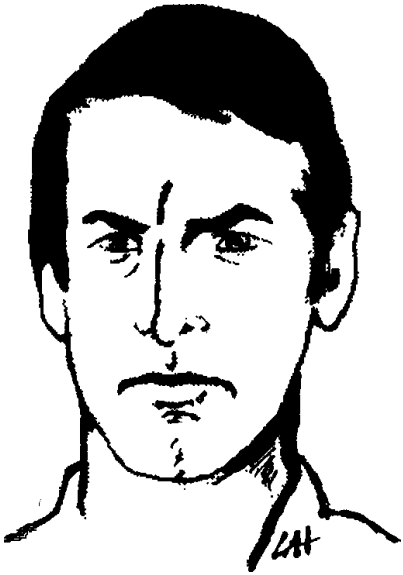
Thank You God
that You always listen.

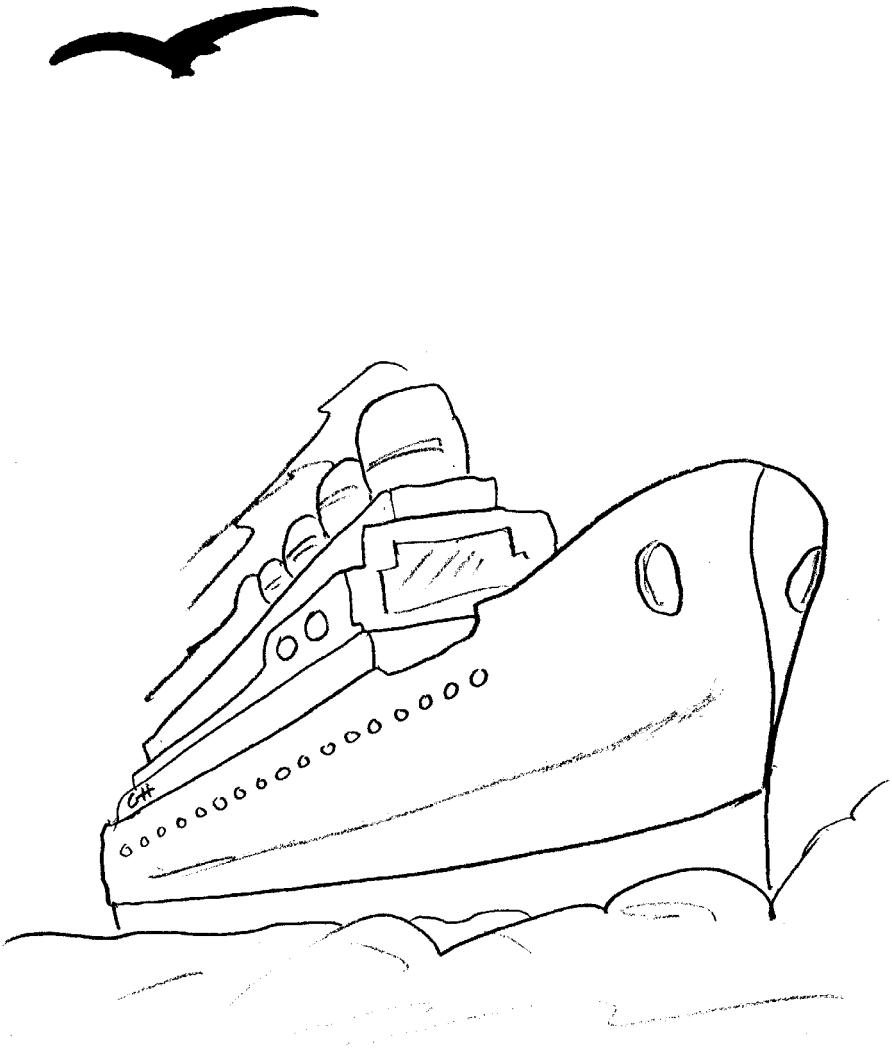
Thank You that You don't always
answer our prayers in the way
that we in our ignorance pray them.

Thank You that Your answers are
loving responses
for our best good and for Your glory.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen.





Week 33
Hope (You can whisper hope to someone today)

A man in his middle years was on a Caribbean cruise. On the first day out he noticed an attractive woman about his age who smiled at him in a friendly way as he passed her on the deck, which pleased him.

That night he managed to get seated at the same table with her for dinner. As the conversation developed, he commented that he had seen her on the deck that day and he had appreciated her friendly smile.

When she heard this she smiled and commented, "Well, I'm a widow and the reason I smiled was that when I saw you I was immediately struck by your strong resemblance to my second husband."

At this he perked up his ears and said, "Oh, and how many times have you been married?"

She looked down at her plate, smiled demurely, and answered, "Once."

Hope is sometimes unspoken.

What is hope?

At a certain university there was a piano teacher that was simply and affectionately known as "Herman." One night in 1978 at a university concert, a distinguished piano player suddenly became ill while performing an extremely difficult piece. No sooner had the artist retired from the stage when Herman rose from his seat in the audience, walked onstage, sat down at the piano and with great mastery completed the performance.

Later that evening, at a party, one of the students asked Herman how he was able to perform such a demanding piece so beautifully without notice and with no rehearsal.

He replied, "In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak.

But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might someday play again, I needed to practice every day. I began by fingering a piece from my repertoire on my bare board bed late one night. The next night I added a second piece and soon I was running through my entire repertoire. I did this every night for five years.

It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was part of that repertoire. That constant practice is what kept my hope alive. Everyday I renewed my hope that I would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano, and in freedom.

Hope is sometimes whispered.

Fifteen-year-old Douglas Maurer had been feeling bad for several days. His mother took him to the hospital in St. Louis where he was diagnosed as having leukaemia.

The doctors told him in frank terms about his disease. They said that for the next three years, he would have to undergo chemotherapy. They didn't sugar-coat the side effects. They told Douglas, that

although he would recover, he may go bald and that his body would most likely bloat. Upon learning this, he went into a deep depression.

His aunt called a florist shop to send Douglas an arrangement of flowers. She told the clerk that it was for her teenage nephew who had leukaemia. When the flowers arrived at the hospital, they were beautiful. Douglas read the card from his aunt without emotion.

Then he noticed a second card. It said: "Douglas - I took your order. I work at Brix Florist. I had leukaemia when I was seven years old. I'm 22 years old now. Good Luck. My heart goes out to you. Sincerely, Laura Bradley."

His face lit up. "Oh wow!" he said.

It's interesting: Douglas Maurer was in a Missouri hospital filled with millions of dollars of the most sophisticated technological equipment. He was being treated by expert doctors and nurses with competent medical training. But it was a sales clerk in a flower shop, a young woman who, by taking the time to care and by being willing to go with what her

heart told her to do - gave Douglas hope and the will to carry on.

In 1868, Septimus Winner using the pseudonym Alice Hawthorne wrote,

“Soft as the voice of an angel,
Breathing a lesson unheard,
Hope with a gentle persuasion
Whispers her comforting word:
Wait till the darkness is over,
Wait till the tempest is done,
Hope for the sunshine tomorrow,
After the shower is gone.
Whispering hope, oh how welcome
thy voice,
Making my heart in its sorrow
rejoice.”

Maybe you need someone to whisper hope to you today.

A common greeting of these days is, "How are you?" The stereotypical reply is, "Fine, and how are you?"

No one comments on the obvious and colossal

lie that it is. I confess that I frequently give this reply to my friends who would be dismayed and bored if I tried to tell them the lengthy truth, for this Model T Ford which I call my body is getting worse and worse, and my friends – even my grandson will recognize it and make mental note, "He is getting old & dottery."

This jalopy of a body of mine is getting into tired condition. The steering gear is so worn and wobbly that I have to use a cane to keep it from running off the road. The headlights are so dim that I need magnifying lenses in front of them. The horn is a mere squawk compared to my youth. And as for climbing hills, the less said the better. It is clear that this jalopy of a body of mine is going to have to be junked one of these days.

Ah, but the real person who lives inside this jalopy of a body is a totally different story. Inside this wearing-out frame, enthusiasm is high, hope is secure, God is real and his truth shines brightly. The companionship of Christ is constant through His Holy Spirit, and God holds out a hope for a new model after this present jalopy is junked.

Despite my personal battles with degenerative

bone disease, four years in a wheelchair with a crushed spinal cord, and a highly malignant brain tumour, there is a hope burning within that is young and vibrant.

So, I am fine, thank you. How are you?

You, too, irrespective of your present circumstances, can have a mind and heart filled with a joyous hope. You see, there are no hopeless situations, only people who think hopelessly. And it all begins in the heart and mind.

Norman Vincent Peale in an article titled ‘Power of the Plus Factor’ wrote, ‘Once [while] walking through the twisted little streets of Kowloon in Hong Kong, I came upon a tattoo studio. In the window were displayed samples of the tattoos available. On the chest or arms you could have tattooed an anchor or flag or mermaid or whatever. But what struck me with force were three words that could be tattooed on one's flesh, Born to lose.’

‘I entered the shop in astonishment and, pointing to those words, asked the Chinese tattoo artist, "Does anyone really have that terrible phrase,

Born to lose, tattooed on his body?"

He replied, "Yes, sometimes."

"But," I said, "I just can't believe that anyone in his right mind would do that."

The Chinese man simply tapped his forehead and said in broken English, "Before tattoo on body, tattoo on mind."'

You see, hopelessness also begins in the heart and mind.

I mentioned that I had been wheelchair-bound for four years. Some one asked me during that time what it was like living with a handicap. Here is how I truthfully answered the enquirer.

"Many decades ago when I was a child at primary school, I would rather read than participate in sporting activities. However at the school's annual sports carnival, running races were mandatory for all students.

My teacher, a Miss Pierre, realised that I would

be unlikely to run competitively against my classmates who spent every opportunity at recess and lunchtime to run and play in the school playgrounds while I sat and read books. So Miss Pierre took me to one side and said, 'Lionel, today for your race I am giving you a handicap.'

'What's that?', I asked.

'It's a head start! When I start the race I will tell you to go first and then I will blow the whistle for the rest of the class to start running.'

Well, I still came in last in the race, but I have always remembered that to have a handicap is to have a head start."

Hope begins in the heart and mind.

It is said that two kinds of birds fly over the California deserts: the hummingbird and the vulture.

All the vulture can see is rotting meat because that is all he looks for. He thrives on that diet. But the hummingbird ignores the carcasses and the smelly flesh of dead animals. Instead, he looks for the tiny

blossoms of the cactus flowers. He buzzes around until he finds the colourful blooms almost hidden from view by the rocks. Each bird finds what it is looking for.

What are you looking for? Better still—what are you finding? What you are finding tells what you are really looking for. Your expectations of life will determine your outcome.

A small boy asked his playmate, "Wouldn't you hate to wear glasses all the time?"

"No-o-o," the other boy answered slowly, "not if I had the kind grandma wears. She sees how to fix a lot of things, and she sees lots of nice things to do on rainy days, and she sees when folks are tired and sorry, and what will make them feel better, and she always sees what you meant to do even if you haven't got things just right. I asked her one day how she could see that way all the time, and she said it was the way she learned to look at things as she grew older. So it must be her glasses."

What sort of glasses are you wearing? There's no danger of developing eyestrain from looking for

the bright side of life. Abraham Lincoln said that ‘Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.’

Author Robert C. Shannon tells of a man who once found a five-dollar bill. After that he always looked down when he walked along the street. Over the course of the years, he found twelve hair-pins, five paper clips, a ballpoint pen, one 20c piece and, four 10c pieces, loads of aluminium cans and a very large assortment of supermarket discount vouchers.

But during those years he never saw a flower, a tree, or the smile of a passing stranger. If we just look down at our problems, we will never rise above them.

We will be like the centipede in the parable who was doing fine until someone asked him which of his one hundred legs came after which. He'd never thought of that before. The more he thought about it, the more he couldn't remember, and eventually he found he couldn't walk at all.

So look forward in hope.

Someone gave me a smile today. I tried my best to give it away to everyone I chanced to meet as I was going along the street.

But everyone that I could see would give my smile right back to me.

When I got home, besides my smile, I had some more to last a while.

Like one candle lighting another, we lose none of our hope when we give hope to others.

In 1939, King George VI of England addressed the British Commonwealth on New Year's Eve at a moment in history when the whole world stood on the brink of uncertainty. Despondency and uncertainty filled the air.

The king's own body was racked by cancer. Before that year was over, his life ended. Unaware of his own physical maladies, he uttered these memorable words adapted from Minnie Louise Haskins' poem "God Knows":

I said to the man who stood at the
Gate of the Year,

"Give me a light that I might go safely
out into the darkness."
And he replied,
"Go out into the darkness
and put your hand
into the Hand of God.
That shall be more to you than a light,
and safer than a known way."

Prayer

Wonderful God,
When we are hurting,
you will always care.
When our mind is foggy,
yours is always clear.

When we are frightened,
you are always near.
When we are lonely,
you can comfort and cheer.

When we are despairing,
struggling to cope

We look to you for strength,
for guidance and for hope

When we need a smile,
we can picture your face,
Smiling at us in peace
and with loving grace.

When we need forgiveness
it is to you we turn
Because pardon is something
that we can never earn.

When we need a loving touch your
promise is very clear
That you will never forsake us
nor leave us alone to fear.

Today we seek to be filled
with your promise of hope
So that we may share
with others the joy
And peace that hope

from you can bring.
For only you
can make our heart rejoice,
Our inner being to dance
and our mind to sing.

Thank you for this gift of hope.
In Jesus precious name,

Amen.

Week 34
Does Jesus Care?

Why does God allow suffering? Why do good people suffer? These are age-old questions without simple answers. God does allow suffering and good people do experience pain.

I am sure that everyone is either suffering now in some way or have suffered at times throughout our lives. Often the suffering is physical; sometimes it is emotional. Then there are events we encounter like tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, fires and terrorism.

And we ask why? And while we may not have the answers, we do know that God does care, and that, from His infinite resources, He provides grace and strength and peace in difficult times to those who put their trust in Him.

Frank E. Graff was Methodist pastor who served churches around Philadelphia. USA. He was born in Tamaqua in 1860 and was reared and educated

in that area of Pennsylvania. He is said to have written the lyrics to over 200 hymns.

He was also said to be a special friend to children and an encouragement to anyone who knew him.

While he was known as the "Sunshine Minister", he went through some severe testing experiences and resulting periods of despondency.

It was while passing through one of these tests that he became very dejected, full of doubt and full of physical agony. Turning to the scriptures for solace and strength he found that 1 Peter 5:7 spoke to his need. "Casting all your care upon Him for He cares for you".

This was inspiration that led him to pen the words of the hymn, "Does Jesus Care?"

Each one of the verses of Graeff's hymn asks some intensely personal and important questions, and the answer is always "O yes, He cares".

The final verse is always one that touches me

deeply:

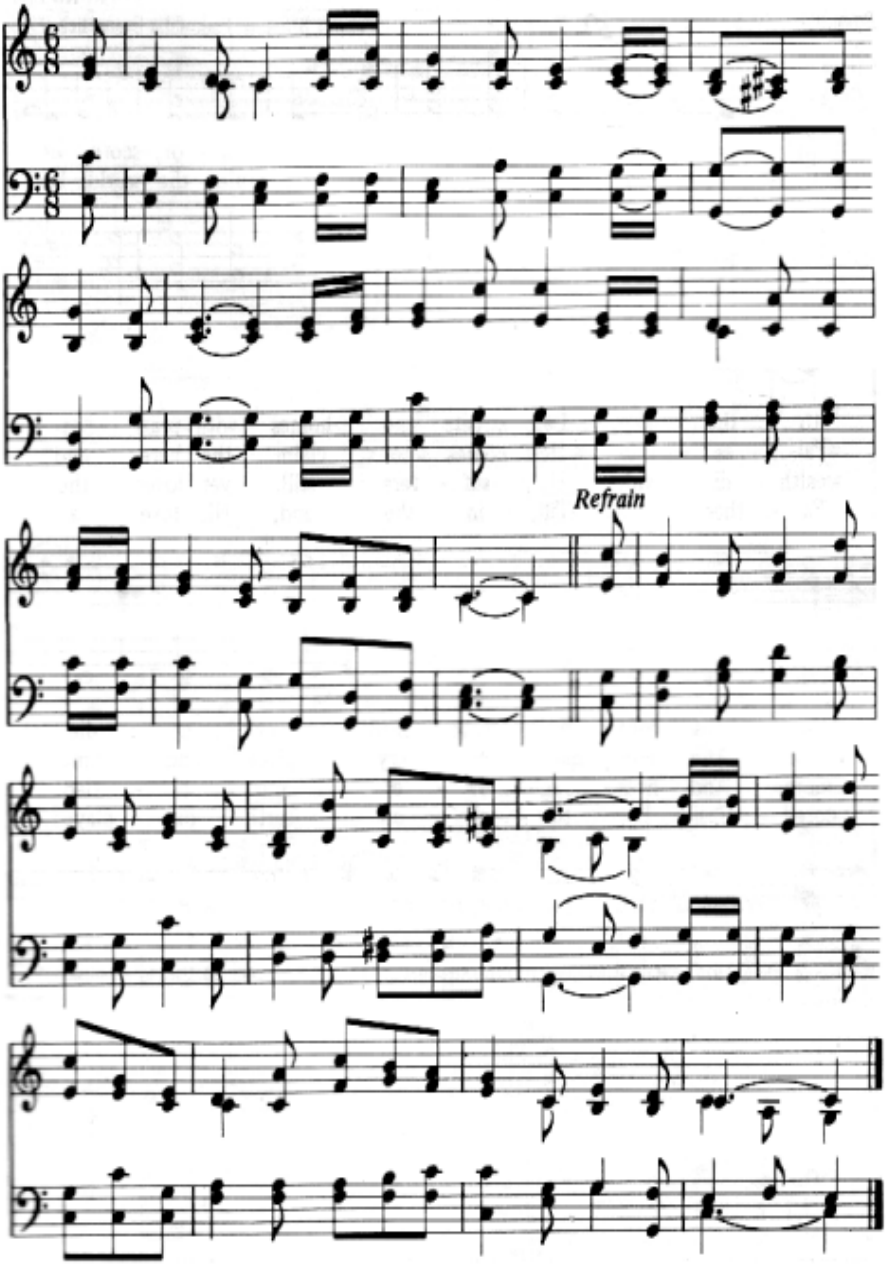
"Does Jesus care when I've said goodbye
To the dearest on earth to me,
And my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks -
Is it aught to Him? Does He see?
O yes, He cares - I know He cares!
His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary,
The long nights dreary,
I know my Saviour cares."

I venture to suggest that we all know the tearful pain of losing someone close to us, and yet we can still know that Jesus really cares and that His heart is touched with our grief.

Why not sing these words
(the music is on the next page.)

1. Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth and song; as the burdens press, and the cares distress, and the way grows weary and long? O yes, He cares - I know He cares! His heart is touched with my grief; when the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Saviour cares.

Does Jesus Care?

Frank E. Graeff (1860-1919) *J. Lincoln Hall (1866-1930)*

2. Does Jesus care when my way is dark with a nameless dread and fear? As the daylight fades into deep night shades, does He care enough to be near? O yes, He cares - I know He cares! His heart is touched with my grief; when the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Saviour cares.

3. Does Jesus care when I've said goodbye to the dearest on earth to me, and my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks - is it aught to Him? Does He see? O yes, He cares - I know He cares! His heart is touched with my grief; when the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Saviour cares.

I was working in New Zealand in the mid 1970s and, although I was at the time a recent nursing graduate, I had been and still was the South Island Secretary of the New Zealand Student Nurses' Association. In those days the Student Nurses' Association was undergoing the process of amalgamation with the national Nurses' Association.

For me, this involved a great deal of travel, personally visiting the nursing staff at the various hospitals throughout many parts of New Zealand, but primarily using my own car, driving around New

Zealand's South Island.

It was on one such excursion that a particular experience of the loving concern of my Friend Jesus stands out vividly in my memory.

On this occasion I was travelling on a week-long trip from Christchurch, over the Southern Alps mountain range to the West Coast, traversing both north and south along the coast and returning back over the mountains to Christchurch.

I was driving a 1962 Morris Minor Convertible and had sufficient fuel for the trip from the Eastern city of Christchurch to the West Coast city of Greymouth.

Planning to buy fuel upon arrival, I was astounded to be told that fuel was not available anywhere on the West Coast due to an industrial dispute with the trucking company supplying it.

Undeterred, I chose to ignore the emotional storm that I began to feel, and continue with my excursion with the naïve assurance that, should I run out of fuel, I could always contact the Automobile

Association whom in my youthful naïveté I imagined to have a ready supply.

I later found out this was not the case, but not because I ran out of fuel.

In fact for five days I drove the length of the western coast, both up and down, visiting town hospitals and isolated clinics, and finally returning to Christchurch over the mountain without adding another drop of fuel to the vehicle.

The car at last spluttered with an empty tank when I drove into my driveway at home.

Not only was it an economical tip, fuel-wise, but also through the undeserved graciousness of a God who cares, I had driven in excess of 560 miles or 800 kilometres on four and a third gallons of petrol (about 20 litres).

I thank God also for calming me so I did not succumb to an emotional storm.

Jesus does not promise to calm every storm in our life, however, Jesus does promise to calm us in

every storm of life.

Victor Hugo, who is famous for his novel the *'Hunchback of Notre Dame'*, also wrote a story called "Ninety-Three".

It tells of a ship caught in a storm on the high seas. At the height of the storm, the frightened sailors heard a terrible crashing noise below the deck.

They all knew at once, that this new noise came from a cannon, part of the of the ship's cargo, that had broken loose.

It was moving back and forth with the swaying of the ship, crashing into the side the timber vessel with terrible impact. Knowing that it could cause the ship to sink, two brave sailors volunteered to make the dangerous attempt to re-tie the loose cannon.

They knew that the danger of a shipwreck from the cannon within was greater than the fury of the storm without.

That is like human life. Storms of 1ife may blow about us, but it is not these exterior storms that

pose the gravest danger. It is the self-focus that can reside within us which can overwhelm us.

The fury of the storm outside may be overwhelming but what is going on inside can pose a greater threat to our lives.

Our only hope lies in trusting in the One who cares.

That's what the disciples learned on a certain day on the Sea of Galilee. They thought the danger lie outside the boat. They would soon learn that real danger lies within the boat within their own hearts.

Reading from the Holy Bible in Mark 4:35-39. Jesus had been teaching the crowds from a boat.

Mark 4:35-39 says, "And the same day, when the even was come, he saith unto them, Let us pass over unto the other side. And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him even as he was in the ship. And there were also with him other little ships. And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full. And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and

they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm."

The disciples' question is our question too: Master, don't you care? Actually, Jesus *doesn't* care about the storm. But does he care about those of us who *do* care about the storm?

The reformer John Wesley, who travelled extensively, could hardly have been called a faint-hearted stay-at-home

But there were times when even he lost his nerve

During one of Wesley's several Atlantic crossings, a frighteningly fierce storm broke out, pitching and tossing the ship about like the toy boat in my infant grandson's bathtub.

While Wesley and others clung to their bunks and hid their heads, a community of Moravian Christians, travelling to their new homeland, calmly gathered to hold their daily worship service and sing

praises to God.

Watching these Moravians, so apparently unperturbed by the howling winds and crashing waves, Wesley realized he was witnessing a truly waterproof faith.

From that moment on, John Wesley says that he prayed that God would give him the ability to likewise ride out life's storms with as much confidence.

What made those Moravians so peaceful in the face of the tempest? It was the same trait that the disciples so woefully lacked in the story from Mark's gospel, and that is an unquenchable trust in Jesus Christ.

That day Jesus stretched out his arms and stilled the storm. Right now Jesus wants to reach out to you and me and help us to ride out the storms in our lives

Sometimes Jesus calms the storm. Sometimes He lets the storm rage and He calms us.

Let us all trust Jesus, for (as the song says, "O

yes, He cares - I know He cares!".

Prayer

Dear Lord, You are our comforter in our times of need, our strength when we are feeling weak, our power when we are helpless, our courage when we are scared, and our wisdom
when we don't know what to do.

Thank You Lord that you are big enough to handle any problem we need face, yet small enough not to make us feel
that You are too busy to care.

Thank You Lord that You are strong enough not to be overwhelmed by hearing our anger, our negativity, our sadness or our burdens, yet tender enough to
lovingly listen and not condemn us.

Thank You Lord that you are tough enough to be able to cope with

whatever accusations we have thrown at You, yet compassionate enough to understand why we feel so bad.

Thank You Lord that You are firm enough in Your knowledge of what is right, yet sympathetic enough to know that sometimes we just need loving not leadership.

Thank You Lord that You are superior enough to demand certain behaviour of us, yet stoop to serve us when we least deserve it.

Thank You Lord for reminding us that You want us to call out to You for help when we need it. We recognise that life is so much easier to cope when we include You as part of the solution to our struggles.

We pray this in the Name of Jesus who cares. Amen.

Week 35
In God's Hands

Isaiah 41:10 are the words of God saying, "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

"Put Your Hand in the Hand" is a gospel pop song composed by Gene MacLellan and first recorded by the Canadian singer Anne Murray. It became popular in the 1970s by a number of other performers, including Elvis Presley and Bing Crosby.

The first verse invites you, the listener, to "Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the waters. Put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea. Take a look at yourself and you can look at the others differently, by puttin' your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee."

A basketball in my hands is worth about $19. A basketball in Michael Jordan's hands is worth about $33 million. It depends on whose hands it's in...

A baseball in my hands is worth about $6. A baseball in Mark McGuire's hands is worth 19 million. It depends on whose hands it's in...

A golf club is almost useless in my hands. A golf club in Tiger Wood's hands is a Major Golf Championship winner. It depends on whose hands it's in...

A walking stick or rod in my hands may shoo away a wild animal. A rod in Moses' hands will part the mighty sea. It depends on whose hands it's in...

A slingshot in my hands is a toy. A slingshot in the biblical David's hands is a mighty weapon. It depends on whose hands it's in...

Two fish and five small flat loaves in my hands is a couple of fish sandwiches. Two fish and five loaves in Jesus' hands will feed thousands. It depends on whose hands they're in...

Nails in my hands might produce a birdhouse. Nails in Jesus Christ's hands will produce salvation for the entire world. It depends on whose hands they're in...

As you see now - it depends on whose hands they're in.

So put your concerns, worries, fears, hopes, dreams; put your family and relationships in God's Hands because, it depends on whose hands they're in.

Kitty Muggeridge in an article in 'Christianity Today' magazine wrote, "Mother Teresa ... and her sisters devoted their lives to God's service and are known throughout the world. When asked about her work, Mother Teresa's reply was: 'I am just a little pencil in God's hands. ... Doing something beautiful for God.'"

In 2001, Viola Jacobson Berg wrote the following poem:

"Trouble erupts with the sunrise,
Trials descend from the sky,
Tragedy borders tomorrow,

But safe in God's hands am I.

This sin-damaged world keeps on struggling,
Each segment of time staggers by,
Uncertainty lurks round the corner,
But safe in God's hands am I.

The storm clouds of life keep on rolling,
Praise God, I am His, is my cry,
For the troubles of life are just passing,
And safe in God's hands am I."

Henry van Dyke in *'The Upward Path'* made this profound observation, "Happy and strong and brave shall we be-able to endure all things, and to do all things-if we believe that every day, every hour, every moment of our life is in God's hands."

God does not like human frailty. God does not gloat when He sees human weakness. God does not feel joy when you are cast down in life. Beneath you, you have a mighty hand upholding you.

When you are weak and things begin to crumble, look to God and see His mighty hand beneath you holding you up. God holds you up even

though you do not know it. God holds you up in your moments of defeat.

God holds you up when you grieve. God holds you up when you are hurt or slighted by others. God holds you up when you suffer a loss due to estrangement.

When you think there is no way you can go on, God's hand so full of hope will give you strength. When you think there is no way to deal with the way things are, God's hand of power will hold you up, give you hope, and give you strength.

Our troubles are often the lever in God's hands to raise us up to heaven. When we put our cares in God's hands, He puts his peace in our hearts.

He invites you and me, "Come hold hands with the Almighty."

Ben Patterson, in *Marriage Partnership Magazine* wrote, "When we pray, we relinquish in a radical way our so-called sovereignty over the purposes of our lives. We subordinate our plans, schedules and life scenarios to the infinitely wiser

and more joyful work of God's hands."

In Ezra 8:22 the king is told, "The hand of our God is favourably disposed to all those who seek Him."

Handing over all our worries and woes, our pain and our precious possessions, our very lives over to God-putting them in His big hand can be scary.

Even if we read in 1 Peter 5:6, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time."

Listen to these words from the pen of Paul Tournier, "We do not have to give up our reason, our intelligence, our knowledge, our faculty to judge, nor our emotions, our likes, our desires, our instincts, our conscious and unconscious aspirations, but rather to place them all in God's hands, so that he may direct, stimulate, fertilize, develop, and use them."

This reminds me of the words of Martin Luther who said, "I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess."

How encouraging the words of Psalm 37:24 that says of the person who is downcast, "Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand."

Is God's hand strong enough to grasp my problems? They're pretty big, you know. Psalm 89:13 says of God, "You have a strong arm; Your hand is mighty, Your right hand is exalted."

Acts 4:30 says, "You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus."

Again, Joshua 4:24 says, "…that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, so that you may fear the LORD your God forever."

And Exodus 15:6 observes, "Your right hand, O LORD, is majestic in power."

If you don't think God's hand is powerful enough for your problems, remember that He is the creator. In Isaiah 48:13 we read God saying, "It was

my hand that laid the foundations of the earth, my right hand that spread out the heavens above."

Jeremiah confirms this in Jeremiah 32:17, "Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you."

The preacher Rick Warren tells us that when his children were young, they took a trip to the Grand Canyon. They were going to hike a thousand metres down a trail there. The children were scared, so they put their hands in his hand.

He says that more importantly, though, he put his hand around theirs. He didn't want them to fall. Halfway down, they may have gotten brave, squirmed, and tried to let go.

But Rick wouldn't let go of them. And God won't let go of you, either.

In 1882, while undergoing great suffering, George Matheson wrote the following personification of the Love and Joy of God:

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;

I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.

No matter what troubles may come your way, one thing you can count on is that God will never leave you or forsake you. Not ever! This is something you can know, because He's promised it in His Word.

Hebrews 13:5 is God talking to you. The Amplified Bible puts Hebrews 13:5 this way: "He [God] Himself has said, I won't in any way fail you nor give you up nor leave you without support. [I will] not, [I will] not, [I will] not in any degree leave you helpless nor forsake nor let [you] down (or relax My hold on you)! [Assuredly not!]."

Reflecting on Hebrews 13:5, I remember playing with our infant daughter at a swimming pool.

I see myself standing in the water, extending my arms toward our little girl, who was at the edge of the pool looking down at me, very nervous about jumping in.

I said something like, "Go ahead and jump into the pool, Precious. I'll catch you. I won't let go."

And full of faith that her daddy would catch her, she jumped in and was scooped up by my arms into a safe embrace. I guess I would have said something like, "I've got you, Precious, you're safe." She knows that I won't let go of her or relax my hold on her. Assuredly not!

That's how your heavenly Father is — He won't let go of you or relax His hold on you. Assuredly not!

He's got you; you're safe, no matter how deep the water is.

I love what is recorded in the Bible in John 10:27-30. Jesus is speaking and He says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.

My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

And in closing let us re-quote Isaiah 41:10. "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

To put your worries in God's hands is a choice that is in your hands. What will you do with that choice?

Prayer

Precious Lord,
trouble is often the lever in Your
hands to raise us up to heaven.

And so today we put our cares in Your
hands, as You put
Your peace in our hearts.

Thank You that we can trust the hands
of You, our almighty God.

In Jesus' precious Name,

Amen.

Week 36
Trust in the Lord and Do Good

On January 2nd. 2014, I waited in a long queue to purchase an electrical appliance in a small shop at the Southport Park Shopping Centre.

Ahead of me at the checkout counter a lady was struggling with a large number of bags of items she was purchasing. I excused myself along the line as I moved forward and offered to fetch a shopping trolley for her; an offer that she welcomed warmly.

With an explanation to the checkout operator, I left my yet-to-be purchased item on the counter while I left the shop and collected a trolley from the nearby car park. When I returned, I helped her to load the trolley and, with a "God Bless You, Madam", I went and rejoined the queue at the end of the line.

I was in no hurry, and when I finally got to the checkout to pay for the appliance, I was told that the lady that I had helped earlier had paid for my item and asked the checkout operator to wish me a Happy

New Year. I never saw the lady again to thank her, but I have not forgotten her act of kindness and generosity.

What goes around, comes around. Jesus said it another way: "Give and it will be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken and running over, will be poured into your lap…"(Luke 6:38).

A man was driving home one evening, on a two-lane country road. Work in this small mid-western community, was almost as slow as his beat-up Pontiac. But he never quit looking. Ever since the factory closed, he'd been unemployed, and with winter raging on, the chill had finally hit home.

It was a lonely road. Not very many people had a reason to be on it, unless they were leaving. Most of his friends had already left. They had families to feed and dreams to fulfil. But he stayed on. After all, this was where he buried his mother and father. He was born here and he knew the country. He could go down this road blind, and tell you what was on either side, and with his headlights not working, that came in handy.

It was starting to get dark and light snow flurries were coming down. He'd better get a move on.

You know, he almost didn't see the old lady, stranded on the side of the road. But even in the dim light of day, he could see she needed help. So he pulled up in front of her Mercedes and got out.

His Pontiac was still sputtering when he approached her. Even with the smile on his face, she was worried. No one had stopped to help for the last hour or so. Was he going to hurt her? He didn't look safe, he looked poor and hungry.

He could see that she was frightened, standing out there in the cold. He knew how she felt. It was that chill which only fear can put in you. He said, "I'm here to help you ma'am. Why don't you wait in the car where it's warm? By the way, my name is Bryan."

Well, all she had was a flat tyre, but for an old lady, that was bad enough. Bryan crawled under the car looking for a place to put the jack, skinning his knuckles a time or two. Soon he was able to change

the tyre. But he had to get dirty and his hands hurt. As he was tightening up the wheel nuts, she rolled down the window and began to talk to him.

She told him that she was from St. Louis and was only just passing through. She couldn't thank him enough for coming to her aid. Bryan just smiled as he closed her boot.

She asked him how much she owed him. Any amount would have been all right with her. She had already imagined all the awful things that could have happened had he not stopped. Bryan never thought twice about the money. This was not a job to him. This was helping someone in need, and God knows there were plenty who had given him a hand in the past... He had lived his whole life that way, and it never occurred to him to act any other way.

He told her that if she really wanted to pay him back, the next time she saw someone who needed help, she could give that person the assistance that they needed, and Bryan added "...and think of me."

He waited until she started her car and drove off. It had been a cold and depressing day, but he felt

good as he headed for home, disappearing into the twilight.

A few miles down the road the lady saw a small cafe. She went in to grab a bite to eat, and take the chill off before she made the last leg of her trip home.

It was a dingy looking restaurant. Outside were two old gas pumps. The whole scene was unfamiliar to her. The cash register was like the telephone of an out of work actor — it didn't ring much.

Her waitress came over and brought a clean towel to wipe her wet hair. She had a sweet smile, one that even being on her feet for the whole day couldn't erase. The lady noticed that the waitress was nearly eight months pregnant, but she never let the strain and aches change her attitude.

The old lady wondered how someone who had so little could be so giving to a stranger. Then she remembered Bryan.

After the lady finished her meal, and the waitress went to get change for her hundred-dollar bill, the lady slipped right out the door. She was gone

by the time the waitress came back. She wondered where the lady could be, then she noticed something written on the napkin under which were four $100 bills.

There were tears in her eyes when she read what the lady wrote. It said: "You don't owe me anything, I have been there too. Somebody recently helped me out, the way I'm helping you. If you really want to pay me back, here is what you do: Do not let this chain of love end with you."

Well, there were tables to clear, sugar bowls to fill, and people to serve, but the waitress made it through another day. That night when she got home from work and climbed into bed, she was thinking about the money and what the lady had written. How could the lady have known how much she and her husband needed it?

With the baby due next month, it was going to be hard. She knew how worried her husband was, and as he lay sleeping next to her, she gave him a soft kiss and whispered soft and low, "Everything's gonna be all right; I love you, Bryan."

"Greater love hath no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Laying down your life for a friend, as Jesus did, was dying for them (us). But we can also lay down our life by laying aside the things we would choose to do, to do something worthy for another. We can lay down our desires and take up the desires or needs of another. For example, I can choose not to read a book (something I really enjoy) and spend the time helping a neighbour in need.

The year was about 1490. Nineteen-year-old Albrecht Dürer and another young man who was slightly older than Albrecht, served as apprentices in a wood-carving establishment in Nuremberg, Germany.

Both men came from homes of poverty, so they shared a room to save expenses as they pursued their common ambition to become master artists.

Frustrated by their lack of money, they hit on a plan. One would study while the other worked and supported both of them, then the other would study while the first one worked.

Each was willing to yield the first benefits to the other, so they finally tossed a coin, and the decision was made that Dürer would go first.

Dürer left Nuremberg and went to Vienna to study under the greatest painter of his time. The other young man went to work first in a restaurant and then in a blacksmith shop.

No toil was too menial or hard because he was helping his friend to receive the training he himself also desired and looked forward to.

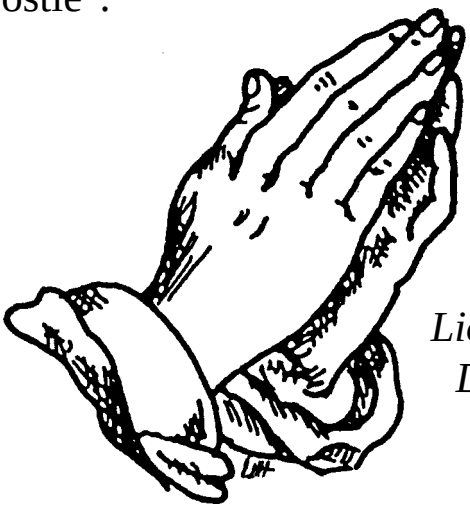
Dürer returned to Nuremberg with a large sum of money from the sale of one painting. Now he would do for his friend what his friend had done for him.

Arriving unannounced and unexpected at the room of his friend, Dürer recognised the voice of his friend in prayer. He entered the room quietly and saw his friend kneeling in prayer, with his hands uplifted.

cstood spellbound, gazing intently at those work-worn hands with enlarged joints, twisted fingers, and stiffened muscles and realised that the

knurled hands of his friend could never become the hands of a master artist.

Dürer made an ink-drawing of those praying hands, and no doubt you have seen a copy of this famous work, commonly called "The Hands of an Apostle".



Lionel's rendition of Dürer's drawing.

For nearly 500 years this drawing has inspired men and women around the world and told the story of devotion and friendship. It reminds us too, of the hands of Jesus that were permanently scarred for us at Calvary.

Dürer's friend and benefactor, whose faith in God was far stronger than any disappointment in life, took this experience as one of the blessings handed

him from the all-loving Father who knows what is best. He found satisfaction in knowing that he had helped Dürer to be what he wanted to become.

What can you do for someone else today?

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days (Ecclesiastes 11:1 KJV). Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back (Ecclesiastes 11:1 NRSV).

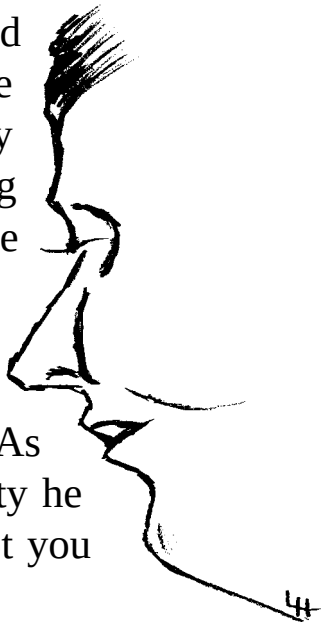
In 'God's Little Devotional Book', I read that Reporters and city officials gathered at a Chicago railway station one afternoon in 1953.

The person they were meeting was the1952 Nobel Peace Prize winner.

A few minutes after the train came to a stop, a giant of a man - six feet four inches - with bushy hair and a large moustache stepped from the train. Cameras flashed.

City officials approached him with hands outstretched. Various people began telling him how honoured they were to meet him. The man politely

thanked them and then, looking over their heads, asked if he could be excused for a moment.



He quickly walked through the crowd until he reached the side of an elderly black woman who was struggling with two large suitcases. He picked up the bags and with a smile, escorted the woman to a bus. After helping her aboard, he wished her a safe journey. As he returned to the greeting party he apologized, "Sorry to have kept you waiting."

The man was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary doctor who had spent his life helping the poor in Africa. In response to Schweitzer's action, one member of the reception committee said with great admiration to the reporter standing next to him, "That's the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work

of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord"

(1 Corinthians 15:58).

Prayer

Thank You Lord that You bring people and opportunities into our life so that we may trust in the You and do good.

Thank You too, that You bless us with the privilege of dwelling in this land and enjoying safe pasture, and that You reward us by providing the desires of our hearts.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

(Prayer based on Psalm 37:3-6, "Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.)

Week 37
The Best is Yet to Come

On my wedding day I was telling the Best Man, a close friend about 15 years my senior, how much I enjoyed the company of Rosemary, the woman I was soon to marry. I spoke of how much we loved to share in conversation and had such a common bond through our religious faith.

I remember his words well; although I am not exactly sure of what he was thinking when he said it, as we were interrupted by the arrival of the bride before the conversation could continue. He said, "Lionel, the best is yet to come."

Well, I immediately agreed when I saw her walking up the aisle toward me and after more than 45 years of marriage, I still agree with his sentiments, as the friendship my wife and I share just gets better and better.

I have been writing and presenting health and lifestyle seminars since 1965 covering over an

hundred different topics. Someone asked me recently, "Which is the best seminar that you have ever presented?" Without hesitation, I replied, "The next one!" As I make a conscious choice to review and continually update my presentations both in content and delivery, I believe that the best is yet to come.

Not only does the Bible contribute to our belief that the best is yet to come, but the things of our daily lives reveal that this is true, too. It is this belief that keeps the scientist, inventor, and researcher busy.

The best car hasn't been developed; the final cure hasn't been discovered; the safest plane hasn't been produced; the best song hasn't been written; the best product is not yet on the market; the best church hasn't been grown; the best sales presentation has not been perfected; the best class hasn't been taught; the best way hasn't been found; the best is yet to come.

The phrase 'The best is yet to come' is a positive affirmation that gives life direction. It provides the hope that there is more to come in this life as well as the next. It's the spirit of expectancy that good things are going to happen. It is seeing life through eyes that look for opportunities that will be greater than

ever. It is received through proper planning and work. Desire is the fuel that makes it a reality.

Not everyone is ready to accept the fact that the best is yet to come. This is true for a number of reasons.

Some are resigned to live in the past. They dwell in the "good old days."

Many are content to live mediocre lives. They are satisfied to drift from day to day.

Insecurity hinders many persons from believing that the best is yet to come. They want to hold on to their position or things. They will never know the excitement of launching out by faith, or waiting for the great things of tomorrow.

Like Mark Twain they believe that nobody likes change except a wet baby.

Negative thinking guides the decisions and attitudes of many people. They choose to accept the premise that the worst is yet to come. They will get what they wish for if they are not careful.

Scores of people have no goals for their lives. They don't know where they are going today, much less tomorrow.

A few think they don't have any needs. They are pleased with the way things are in their lives. There is always room for improvement in everyone's life; I know that there is room in mine for improvement.

And finally, fear is always a major enemy to progress. It hinders a person from becoming excited about the future. 2 Timothy 1:7 says, " For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind".

And in 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear".

In John 13:37 and 38 Jesus told Peter that the disciple would deny Him. John 13 verse 37 and 38 read, "Peter said unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake. Jesus answered him, Wilt thou lay down thy life for my sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice."

How sad for Peter. Now, because there were no chapter divisions when the Bible was written, we hear Jesus immediately sharing the words we read in chapter 14 verse 1 and following, telling peter, in essence, that the best is yet to come.

John 14:1, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

Verse 3 and following, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth... I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. ...my Father will love (you), and we will come unto (you), and make our abode with (you). ... the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."

And verse 27, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I

unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

The best is yet to come. Reading from 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, 'The Message':

"…we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever.

And the conversation continues in 2 Corinthians 5:1, "For instance, we know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven-God-made, not handmade-and we'll never have to relocate our "tents" again. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move-and so we cry out in frustration."

Peterson adds, "Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we're tired of it! We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less."

Verse 6, "That's why we live with such good cheer. You won't see us drooping our heads or dragging our feet! Cramped conditions here don't get us down. They only remind us of the spacious living conditions ahead. It's what we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going. Do you suppose a few ruts in the road or rocks in the path are going to stop us? When the time comes, we'll be plenty ready to exchange exile for homecoming."

The American Free Methodist pastor Michael De Rosa shares a relevant story.

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. So as she was getting her things "in order," she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes.

She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in. The woman also requested to be buried with her favourite Bible.

Everything was in order and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her. There's one more thing," she said excitedly.

"What's that?" came the pastor's reply.

"This is very important," the woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand."

The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

"That surprises you, doesn't it?" the woman asked.

"Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and potluck dinners, I always

remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'Keep your fork.' It was my favourite part because I knew that something better was coming... like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful, and with substance!

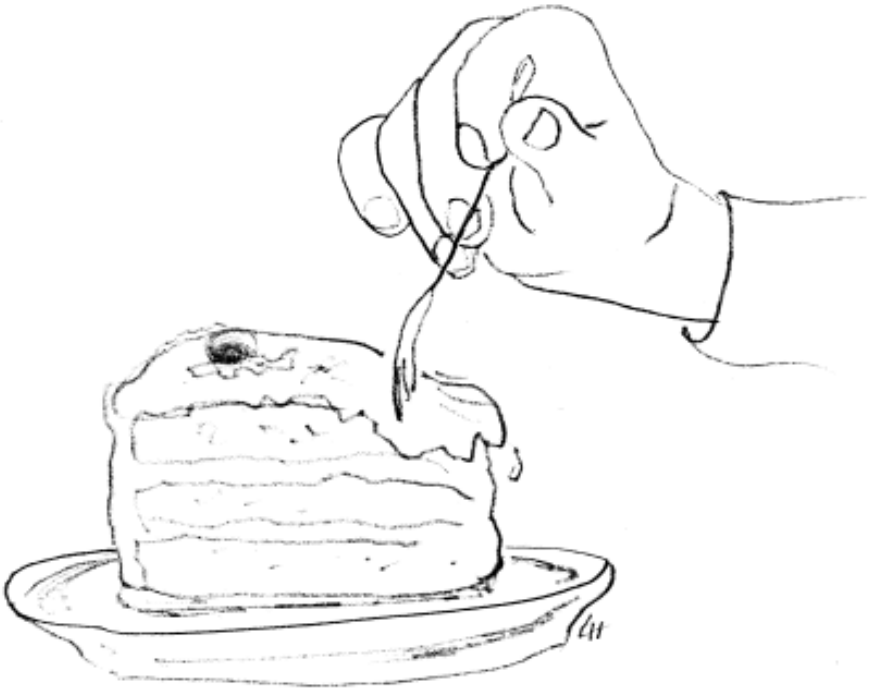
So, I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder "What's with the fork?'. Then I want you to tell them: "Keep your fork....the best is yet to come."

The pastor's eyes welled up with tears of joy as he hugged the woman good-bye. He knew this would be one of the last times he would see her before her death. But he also knew that the woman had a better grasp of heaven than he did. She KNEW that something better was coming.

At the funeral people were walking by the woman's casket and they saw the pretty dress she was wearing and her favourite Bible and the fork placed in her right hand.

Over and over, the pastor heard the question "What's with the fork?" And over and over he smiled.

During his message, the pastor told the people of the conversation he had with the woman shortly before she died. He also told them about the fork and how symbolized for her that "The best is yet to come". The pastor told the people how he could not stop thinking about the fork and told them that they probably would not be able to stop thinking about it either.



I started this devotional telling of a wedding and as I conclude with this story of a funeral, please remember that each time you reach for your fork, each time you are feeling lost, lonely, hurting, grieving or despairing, please remember these words and rejoice with me that, "The best is yet to come".

Prayer

Like a plane bursting through the clouds into the glorious sunshine, in faith, we are expecting that the best is yet to come.

Please, Lord, reinforce in our minds and hearts this attitude of optimistic expectance, knowing that You are always faithful, all your promises are 'yea' and 'amen'.

And now may the blessing of God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Lord Jesus Christ be upon each of us, in Jesus' Name, Amen."

Week 38
Peace Like a River

What does it mean to have peace like a river, especially when the circumstances of life are anything but peaceful?

When I worked in a clinical setting at a Christchurch psychiatric hospital we often used word association tests to measure cognitive progress in the inmates of that facility. For example I would ask, "What is the first thing that comes to mind when I say 'Mary had a little lamb'?" Or I might ask, "What do you think about when I use the word 'Letterbox'?"

If I used the expression, "Peace like a river", what comes first to your mind?

For me, my first thoughts when I hear the expression, "Peace like a river" are the opening words of the hymn, 'It Is well' by Horatio Spafford: "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well with my soul'."

Heartbreak gives birth to the lyrics of great songs and hymns. Love lost, loved ones missed, and even tragedies elicit the emotions and that can best be expressed in the medium of music. These songs move listeners and stir up memories bringing about feelings of nostalgia or melancholy, that sort of sadness that leaves us feeling better.

Horatio Spafford was a successful lawyer and real estate investor in Chicago in the 1800s. He and his wife, Anna, had one son and four daughters and lived a life of generosity in giving and service in their church, until 1871 that is. In that year they lost their four-year-old son to scarlet fever and a few months later the great Chicago fire wiped out the majority of their property holdings. They made it through the next two years until, in 1873, tragedy struck again.

The Spaffords had planned to visit Europe as a family, but business kept Horatio behind. On the voyage, the ship Anna and their four daughters were travelling on struck another vessel and sank rapidly. Only Anna survived; she sent a hauntingly brief telegram to Horatio bearing the words "Saved alone."

One can only imagine Horatio Spafford's grief

upon receiving the news. It must have been paralysing. But on his own voyage to meet Anna as his ship neared the place where his daughters had drowned he was inspired to write the lyrics for the hymn "It is Well with My Soul."

Unlike many heartbreak songs, it focuses less on what was lost and more on where hope can be found. No doubt Spafford was shattered by the loss of his daughters, but his heart turned to the faithfulness of God in the midst of loss and the work of Jesus to rescue sinners.

The hymn does not diminish or gloss over pain and tragedy but rather proclaims that God is present in them and greater than them. God's free gift of peace can be very real and present for us too, if we but ask Him for it.

For some of us, our first thoughts when we hear the expression, "Peace like a river", may be the African-American Spiritual song with the refrain, "I got peace like a river, I got peace like a river, I got peace like a river in-a my soul".

A certain faith community would be familiar

with 1 Nephi 20:18, which says: "O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! Then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea"

Centuries earlier, the prophet Isaiah in the Holy Bible said exactly the same thing: "O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! Then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea" (Isaiah 48:18).

Isaiah also said: For thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will extend peace to [Jerusalem] like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream (Isaiah 66:12)

For others the expression 'Peace like a river' may bring to mind the 2001 rhapsodic novel 'Peace Like a River' by Leif Enger. A multi-genre novel about a father raising his three children in 1960s Minnesota, celebrating family, faith, and America's pioneering spirit.

Although I have not read the novel yet, reviewers tell us that 'Peace Like a River' is the combination of an heroic quest, a tragedy, a romance,

and a heartfelt meditation on the possibility of hope, with a very strong focus on the power of Prayer.

There are a number of aspects to "peace like a river".

Firstly, a river is generally continually running. The water surges over rocks, logs, falls, and a considerable variety of debris. The river simply finds a way to go around or over obstacles. It just keeps flowing. So when we think of peace like a river, we can think of peace as something that can be continually flowing in our lives despite our circumstances or the obstacles that may get in our path, or the junk that we tend to accumulate.

So how can we feel peace continually flowing in the midst of turmoil and when life feels turbulent?

Charles Haddon Spurgeon said, The believer's peace is like a river for continuance. Look at it, rising as a little brook among the mosses of the lone green hill. By and by it leaps as a rugged [waterfall]; then it flows along that fair valley where the red deer wanders and the child loves to play. With hum of pleasant music the brook turns the village mill. Listen to its changing tune as it ripples over its pebbly bed or leaps

down the wheel, or sports in eddies where the trees bend down their branches to kiss the current."

"Soon the small stream has become a river, and bears upon its flood full many a craft. Then its bosom swells, bridges with noble arches span it, and, grown vaster still, it becomes an estuary, broad enough to be an arm of old Father Ocean, pouring its water-floods into the mighty main. The river endures the lapse of ages; it is no evanescent morning cloud or transient rain flood, but in all its stages it is permanent. Men may come, and men may go, But [the river flows] on forever."

"Forevermore, throughout all generations, the river speeds to its destined place. Such is the peace of the Christian. He always has reason for comfort. He has not a consolation like a swollen torrent that is dried up under the hot sun of adversity, but peace is his rightful possession at all times. You shall discover the noble river when it mirrors the stars or sends back the sheen of the moon. You may see its waves in the hour of tempest by the lightning's flash, as well as in the day of calm when the sun shines brightly on them."

"The river is always in its place. And in the

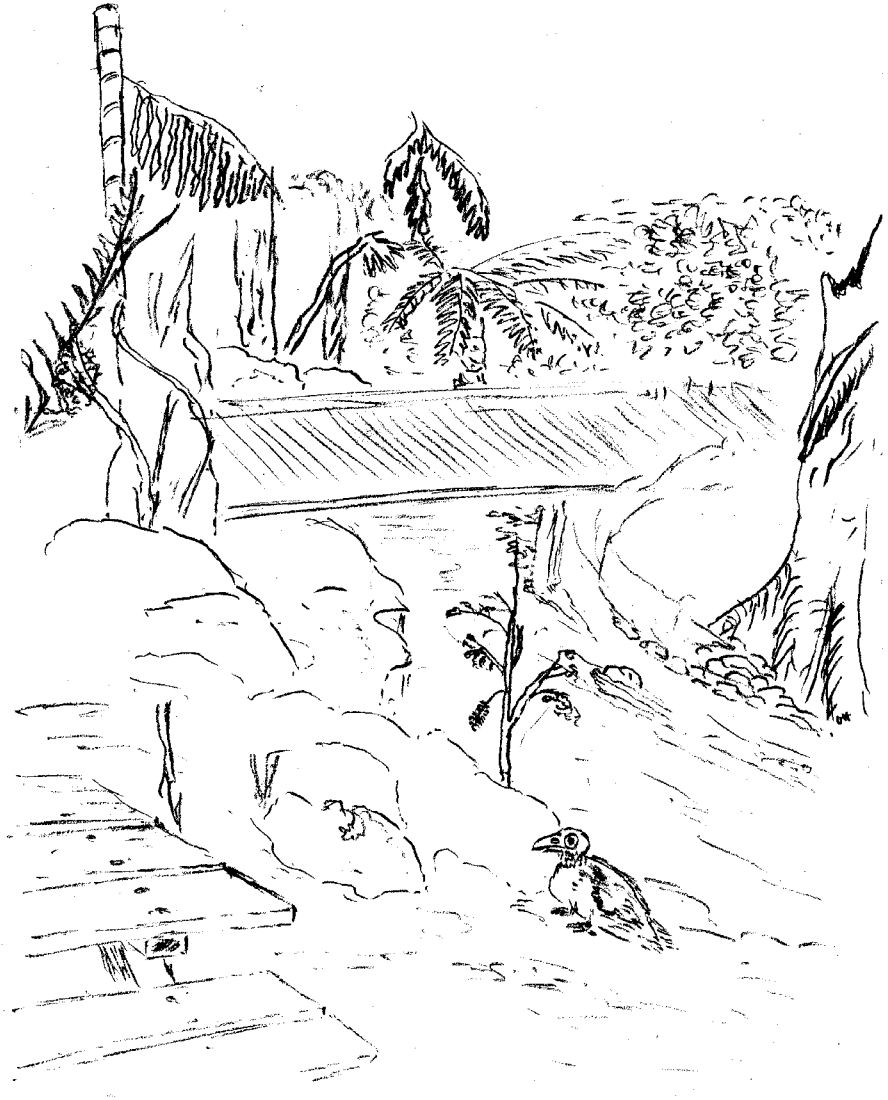
same way, come night, come day, come sickness, come health, come what will, the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep the Christian's heart and mind through Jesus Christ.".

When people came to Jesus in great distress and He responded with words such as "Peace, be still" (Mark 4:39) or "Be not afraid, only believe" (Mark 5:36). These calm responses didn't mean that Jesus never felt troubled, sorrowful, or anguished, or that we won't either.

However, with His understanding of the plan of salvation and complete trust in His Father's will, He was able to endure all things and overcome so that He might be able to comfort us in all things. As He said: "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

One of the most memorable rivers for me was in a tranquil forest set high in the Southern Alps mountain range in New Zealand. The river had nurtured the surrounding foliage and it harboured an abundance of wildlife, The combined sound of the

rippling water and the chorus of birdlife made for a very peaceful setting, indeed.



On several occasions our family lived close to a river, so close in fact, that we have had a glorious

view of the water from our home. Real estate agents glowingly extol the virtues of a waterfront property, waxing lyrically about the calming effects of a watercourse within the line of vision.

These rivers have less comforting memories, especially when, on three occasions at different locations we had the river flowing beneath our house during a time of flooding.

It is at turbulent times such as these that God's peace can far outweigh any detritus life washes up on our shores, if we will only choose to call upon Him.

There are at least four places along a river that are particularly peaceful. Firstly at the source where a rippling brook or spring gurgles lullingly over pebbles and moss-covered banks.

Secondly where it slowly meanders across wide valleys, thirdly deep below the surface, and finally at the broad expanse as the smooth broad waters of the river meets the mighty ocean.

So how do we experience peace flowing in our

lives like a river? Firstly we go to the source — to Jesus Christ. Looking to the source of peace, we can gratefully recognize the peace that we can have in our life today and each and every day because of what Jesus has done for all of us. He suffered the absence of peace to be able to bring us His peace.

Secondly, peace may be found where a river slowly meanders across wide valleys.

Sometimes we become so settled in our peace that we are unprepared for that waterfall or the rapids just around the corner. This often happens because we have sought our peace in the comforts the world has to offer.

Jesus said in John 14:27, Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

And again in John 16:33, These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

It is an interesting scientific fact that deep water, though it may be turbulent, roiling and churning on the surface is placid, unruffled and tranquil deep below. I sometimes find passages in the Bible that, superficially, are troubling — until I go deep below the surface to discover the author's true intent.

The hymn writer, Frances Ridley Havergal wrote these words: Like a river glorious, is God's perfect peace, over all victorious, in its bright increase; perfect, yet it floweth, fuller every day, perfect, yet it groweth, deeper all the way.

The final place where a river is often peaceful is at the end of its life as it broadens out, often in a wide delta to enter the ocean.

In our sunset years or whenever our earthly lives are drawing to an end we can still have peace like a river.

As we focus our lives on the truths of God's plan of salvation and the deliverance through Jesus Christ, we can echo the expression that everything will be all right in the end-and if it's not all right, then it's not the end.

Prayer

"May the grace of Christ our Saviour and the Father's boundless love, with the Holy Spirit's favour, rest upon us from above.

Thus may we abide in union with each other and the Lord, and possess, in sweet communion, joys which earth cannot afford."*

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion
of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

**From a hymn by John Newton*

Week 39
How Great Thou Art

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds Thy hands have made, I see the stars; I hear the rolling thunder. Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee, "How great Thou art; how great Thou art", then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee, "How great Thou art; how great Thou art.

Many of you will be familiar with this as a song or hymn composed by Stuart Hine.

If you know this song, then the tune that may be ringing in your head is an old Swedish Folk melody, which is not surprising because the hymnist Dr Hine discovered these thoughts in a poem composed by a Swedish minister, Carl Boburg, while Hine was a missionary in Russia.

Carl Boburg was born the son of a carpenter in

Sweden in 1859. He started out as a sailor, and perhaps we can imagine how at night, out on the northern seas, he might have looked up at the stars and wondered just how they came to be there. After a time at sea, he went to Bible School and later became a member of the Swedish parliament. He published many poems, hymns and songs.

In 1885 Boburg wrote a poem titled *'O Store Gud'*, Swedish for "O Mighty God".

Here is the Lionel Hartley translation of the Swedish poem:

"When I consider the world
Which You made
with Your mighty word,
And how Your wisdom
guides the web of life
And all creation feeds at Your table,
Then my soul bursts forth
in songs of praise:
O mighty God! O mighty God!"

Stuart Hine was so moved by these words that he translated, expanded and modified the words to the song that now may be familiar to some of us.

Both Hine and Boburg saw a universe of beauty, power and wonder, and in that, they recognised the fingerprints of a beautiful, powerful and wonderful God - a God so great He could create trillions of stars with, as the Bible tells us, just the power of his Word.

The Hubble Space Telescope was launched April 24, 1990, aboard the Space Shuttle *Discovery* with a mission to explore the furthest reaches of the universe. Hubble is currently located about 535 kilometres or 332 miles above Earth's surface, where it completes 15 orbits per day, approximately one every 95 minutes. Immediately Hubble began to transmit images, it also began to change our view of the cosmos, capturing new stars and details that were impossible to see from earth.

However, no-one was prepared for what happened at the end of 1995. Over the Christmas holidays that year, the Institute director, Robert Williams, decided to use the 10-day break to point the telescope at a tiny, black, apparently empty, patch of sky no bigger than the size of a grain of sand held at arm’s length.

When the team returned after Christmas and looked at the images it had captured, they were astonished - there was no empty black patch of space. They found not one or two new stars, but hundreds and hundreds of galaxies, each one containing billions of stars.

As a result of this discovery astronomers are now confident that there are trillions of galaxies each one with billions of stars and that the universe is far bigger and more glorious than we ever could have imagined.

As Professor Jim Al-Khallili, the well-known theoretical physicist and broadcaster said “it is impossible not to … be intimidated by the extraordinary depth of the cosmos”.

Now Carl Boberg, who wrote the original poem, didn’t have the benefit of knowing all that the Hubble telescope has shown us, but he still knew how to find wonder in creation.

Verse 2: *‘When through the woods and forest glades I wander, and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees. When I look down, from lofty mountain*

grandeur, and see the brook and feel the gentle breeze. Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee, "how great Thou art; how great Thou art, then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee, how great Thou art; how great Thou art."'

Hine and Boburg also saw a God who was interested in the detail, the forest glades through which they wandered, the birds singing sweetly in the trees. A God who not only knows every star, but lovingly created every tree, every leaf, and who is so absorbed in the beauty and detail of life on earth. God finds joy in bird song just as we do.

But here's an interesting thing - the bible tells us surprisingly little about how these wonders were created — it deals with the creation of billions of galaxies and trillions of stars with just six words in the original language. It says, "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" and then adds the seemingly after-thought line "and He made the stars also …"

You may have read the Bible, or you may not even own one. Either way it's clear that those who wrote it were not really very interested in the 'how'

of creation… that's what science is for, and the Bible was never meant to be a science textbook. Instead the Bible is much more interested in the Whom and the why - Who is this creator God? What is His character like? Why did He make us?

Maybe you have heard of some of the Old Testament Bible stories like Adam and Eve, David and Goliath, Moses and the Exodus or the Ten Commandments.

When you put all of the stories together, they can be summarised as saying just two things: Firstly, they help us understand just how big, how powerful, but also how wonderful the God who created the stars is….

And secondly, they then reassure us that this great and mighty God actually loves us and wants to be in relationship with us.

Verse three: *'And when I think, that God, His Son not sparing, sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in. That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin. Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee, "how great Thou art;*

how great Thou art, then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee how great Thou art; how great Thou art."'

So this poem , "How Great Thou Art" introduces us to a mighty God, creator of the universe and also the designer of you and me. The poem goes on to explain that this same God loves us intimately — every one of us, no matter who we are, what we've done, or what we're going through at this present moment. Because He love us individually, He not only wants to bear our burdens, He does it gladly.

Those Old Testament Stories of Abraham, of Moses, of David are all about God finding a group of people to get to know Him and for God to teach who He was and how He loved them, so they could pass it onto others.

If we read our way through all of the Old Testament, we will find out that they were not always very good at that, and time after time they got it wrong and lost the plot. But they were never out of God's reach. Be assured that you and I are not out of the compassionate reach of this loving God either.

The poem authors saw the same link, as the poem moved seamlessly from the wonders of creation in verse two to the story of Jesus and the cross in verse three, *'And when I think, that God, His Son not sparing, sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in….'*

This is wonderful news, however the poem/ song doesn't end there, for it also talks excitedly of Jesus coming again.

Verse 4: *'When Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamation, and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart. Then I shall bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, "My God, how great Thou art!" Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee, "how great Thou art; how great Thou art, then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee how great Thou art; how great Thou art."*

So the good news for today is that the God who created the mighty universe is the same God that loves us and today invites you and me to love Him too.

Prayer

Dear Lord, Thank You that You are the powerful, great God who created the entire universe and trillions of stars with just the power of Your word.

Thank You also that You love the beauty and detail of life, taking joy in peaceful forest glades and exquisite bird song as well as in the splendour of the lofty mountains.

Thank You that most of all You find joy and love in Your relationship with us.

Help us to know Your love, to experience Your joy, to see the world and people around us as You do, and to feel Your loving touch today.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Week 40
Crimond (Psalm 23)

Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

One of the first passages of Scripture that many people learn as a child is the Shepherd's Psalm, Psalm 23.

Listen to these versified words from a 17th Century translation of the original Hebrew Scriptures: *"The Lord's my Shepherd; I'll not want. He makes me down to lie in pastures green; He leadeth me. The*

quiet waters by."

We are no doubt familiar with Newton's hymn Amazing Grace where we see how God lavishes us with His extraordinary love, grace, and hope, giving us so much more than we could ever deserve and so much more than we could ever have dreamed of. However, if we are honest, there are times in all our lives when we may not feel "very lavished", when love, hope and grace feel a long, long way away.

For every one of us there will be times in our journey through life that are difficult and full of pain, and ever more so as we get older: Failing health, loneliness and isolation, the loss of friends and loved ones, maybe even the fear of our own death and future.

These are all very real challenges that we will face at some point. And in such times of struggle, for several thousand years people have turned to Psalm 23 for comfort, guidance and support. The Psalm itself was written by King David of Israel about 1,000 years before Jesus was born.

David was the greatest King Israel ever had, he was powerful, victorious in battle and loved by

his people. He was the twenty-five times great grandfather of Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus and, as well as being king, David was a significant spiritual leader.

But David wasn't always a sophisticated, handsome, psalm writing king — he started life as a shepherd boy, looking after his father's sheep. And this psalm draws on his experience as a shepherd and the psalm follows the journey through a year in the life of a shepherd and his sheep.

"The Lord is my shepherd" starts at home, where the sheep can relax in green pastures, feeding beside still waters, where every need is carefully supplied, and the sheep are safe and well fed.

But as the summer heat comes, the grass withers and streams dry out, so the shepherd needs to lead his sheep up into the mountains to the high pastures, where the grass is better.

Contemplate these words: *"My soul He doth restore again, and me to walk doth make (within the paths of righteousness), e'en for His own name's sake."*

And the journey there, through the dark valleys, up the mountainsides can be hazardous with wolves, bears and lions to fend off.

"Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale, yet will I fear no ill; for Thou art with me, and Thy rod and staff, me comfort still."

But when the sheep get to the high plateaus or tablelands as they are called, they will find the shepherd has already checked the grass for them, and it will sustain them through the hot summer, while the shepherd will protect them from predators with his rod and staff.

"My table Thou hast furnished in presence of my foes; my head Thou dost with oil anoint, and my cup overflows."

Then, once summer turns to autumn, the shepherd will lead his sheep back home for the winter months and back to safety.

"Goodness and mercy all my life shall surely follow me, and in God's house forevermore, my

dwelling place shall be."

And in the same way God, our Good Shepherd, looks after us....

Let's notice 3 things:

Firstly, the good shepherd daily cares for and protects his sheep.

Secondly, the good shepherd travels every step of the journey with his sheep

And finally, the good shepherd leads his sheep back to his home where they are safe and looked after for ever.

The book of Isaiah says "[God] tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart"

This is exactly the picture of daily love and care that David sees as he writes this psalm.

God is his Shepherd and He is our shepherd.

Jesus said in John 10 verses 11 and again in verse 14: "I am the good shepherd."

He created and redeemed me and you. He loves us as his own, just like the shepherd owns and cares for his sheep.

But just as God is like the shepherd, so we are like sheep and often in need of shepherding!

Of all domesticated animals, sheep are the least able to look after themselves. They have no defence against predators, they cannot find their own food, they are susceptible to endless bugs and infections.

They can't even shed their own ‘fur’ without the help of the shepherd. They are also known for making some very poor decisions that leave them in trouble.

It is not that uncommon for example, for a slightly overweight sheep to find a nice comfy hollow to lie in. But as it snuggles down, its centre of gravity can move and suddenly none of its feet are touching the ground. It's then stuck.

Shepherds refer to this as the sheep being cast, stuck on its back with its legs waving in the air and unable to get up.

Now, whilst this might appear funny to us, it can be rather serious for the sheep... without getting too biological, gasses can build up in its stomach, the blood supply is cut off from its legs and it rapidly gets weaker and weaker. The changes in the blood circulation caused the sheep to smell differently to pesky flies and they may come and lay eggs in the wool for the flies know that, if left alone, the sheep will die.

But if a shepherd finds a cast down sheep, he can't just put it upright and walk away. He must turn it gently, rubbing its legs to bring the blood supply back and rubbing its stomach to let the gases go down and then support it until it is steady enough to walk by itself.

I think this is a wonderful picture of how God, our Shepherd, cares for us. Like sheep, we will often look for the comfy hollow to settle in, choosing the easy life, rather than following the shepherd.

We too can get distracted and lost down the cul-de-sacs of life. But God is the wonderful shepherd who daily comes and picks us up, puts us gently on our feet, and returns us to his flock. As the psalm says, He restores our soul.

As we know, life is a journey and there will be times when things are not easy — we find ourselves in a dark place, where we can't see where we are going nor where we are. Consequently we may be afraid. And here the psalm promises us that God is by our side journeying with us.

Unlike leading a herd of goats, to get to the better pastures the Shepherd can't take the sheep along the ridges because the ground is too steep. Instead he must take them along the narrow, deep and dark valleys.

But in these valleys the sheep can't see where they are going, it is dark, there are predators, so they have no choice but trust to the wisdom and protection of their shepherd.

In the same way David promises that God will be there to lead us through the dark times when we

cannot see where we are going or what may be coming up from behind.

David does not say he walks *into* the valley of shadow of death but *through* it. The sheep must go through the valleys either on their way to the fresh grass of the high plateaus, or on their way back home.

Like them, following a Shepherd guide, we will not stay permanently in the valleys, God will lead us out — either to a better place here, or to our ultimate home, but either way he promises to always walk with us.

We have been sharing about the Shepherd's Psalm, Psalm 23. But I would argue that it is really the Sheep's Psalm.

How very personal it is, all through the Psalm. "The Lord is MY Shepherd" "He makes ME lie down" "He leads ME", "He guides ME"

Today I invite you, my reader, to take these words personally and get to know and follow the Good Shepherd.

Prayer

Lord, please be our shepherd. With Your leading, we shall not lack anything that is for our good.

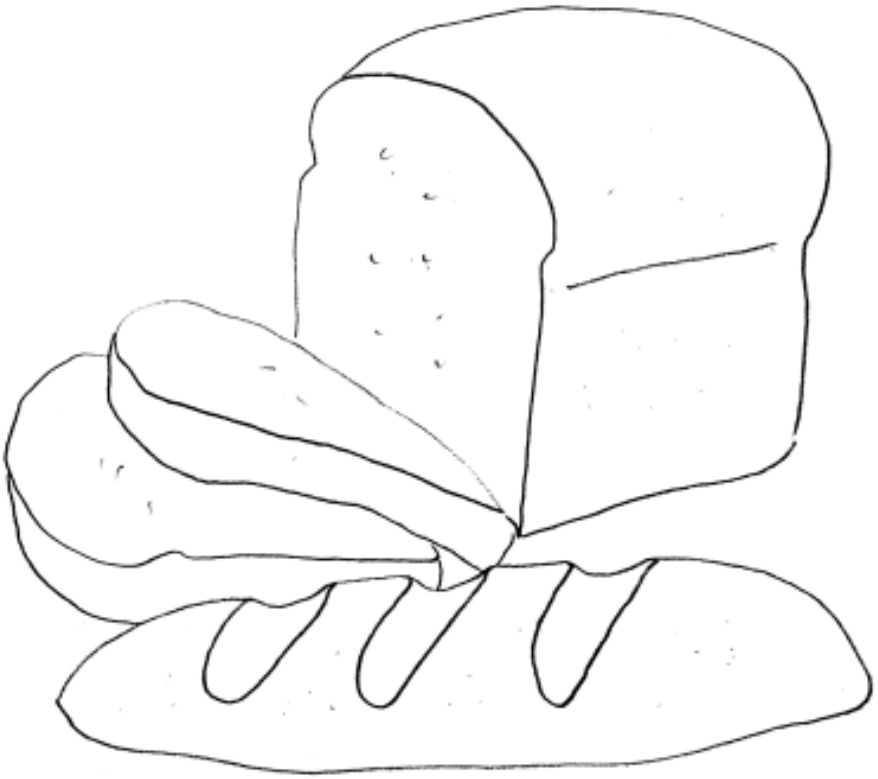
You restore and lead us in paths of righteousness for Your name's sake.

Even when we walk through the valleys of life we need fear no evil: for You are with us.

Thank You for all You have provided.

Because of this we can look forward to Your goodness and mercy following us all the days of our life, both here and forevermore.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.



Week 41
Breaking Bread

Our Lord's Prayer includes a petition for bread: in Matthew 5:9-11 Jesus said, *"After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread…"*

What an encouragement that God our heavenly Father cares about our stomachs. He cares about the things we need day by day; cares about these basic practical details.

Samuel Johnson, the 18th-century English lexicographer, was once challenged about the amount of care he was taking over his stomach. Dr. Johnson patted his stomach and replied, 'My dear sir, if I did not take good care of this place I would not be able to take good care of anything else.'

This is precisely the reason why our Lord taught us to pray, 'Father, give us this day our daily

bread.'

The Scriptures also remind us that bread is to be shared. This even includes a blessing to those who share: "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again" (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

Poland has a distinctive custom of sharing the *oplatek* - a special wafer - in homes, churches and work-places at Christmas time. Each person breaks off a piece of another's *oplatek* and eats it, so expressing the unity, love and forgiveness between people to whom the Saviour came.

Breaking bread is a symbol of sharing.

There is an interesting phrase that is repeated in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and again in Luke's second book, the Book of Acts (27:35).

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples. Matthew 26:26.

And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it, and gave to them. Mark 14:22.

And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them. Luke 22:19.

And again in Luke 24:30 And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them.

The last part of Acts chapter 2 gives the description of the early church: Verse 42

Acts 2:42 "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And verse 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts

I'd like you to imagine yourself walking along a dusty country road. You're not far from Jerusalem and you're walking towards your home. It's a place called Emmaus (meaning the obscure place of despised people).

It isn't really a village but rather a compound or a barracks, and your work there is to serve the Roman occupation army, because that's what happened at the barracks of Emmaus.

Along the road are the disciples Cleopas and his companion, possibly his wife. Now, they are returning from perhaps a long Passover weekend in Jerusalem and their minds are spinning with all the things that have happened there, the incredible events that have led from Jesus being welcomed into Jerusalem as a king to very quickly suffering the pain and shame of death by crucifixion.

But now, Jesus, whom they thought was going to be the Messiah, is risen from the dead! What to make of all these events? You can imagine how their hearts must have been weighed down with the contradictions, the paradoxes and the possibilities.

As they continue on, discussing heart-to-heart, towards their home, all of a sudden Jesus comes along walking with them.

Now, there's something that's stopping them from seeing that it is the Lord. Possibly the Lord chose to conceal his identity so as not to frighten them.

Could it have been their fear that the Resurrection was too good to be true? They just didn't want to believe that because it seemed to defy logic.

Maybe this has happened to us in our lives when we find ourselves in intolerable or illogical, irrational situations?

Maybe their grief was fraught with denial, "Oh no, it couldn't have happened."

Jesus says to them, 'What are you discussing?'. They say, 'You must be the only man in all of Jerusalem who doesn't know what's been happening there these last several days', and they proceed to tell Him all about it from the triumphal entry to the grave.

Then Jesus says to them, 'Your attitude seems foolish, being so slow to believe the full message of the prophets. Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?' And then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, He explains to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about Himself.

When they drew near to the village, He made as if to go on but they pressed Him to stay with them. They said, 'It's nearly evening and the day is almost over'. So He went in to stay with them.

Now, while He was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing, then he broke it and handed it to them and at that moment their eyes were opened and they recognised Him. But also at that moment He vanished from their sight.

And then they said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?'

They set out that instant and returned the eight miles (about 13 kilometres) back to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven assembled together with their companions, who said to them, 'Yes, it is true. The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon'.

And then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognised him at the breaking of the bread.

Bearing in mind that bread in those days was not anything like the large loaves we bake or buy today. These were like small round flat buns.

If I am given a bun to eat, after saying thanks, I proceed to bite into it. If I break it apart, it is to

share a portion with someone else. The expression 'breaking bread' is a symbol of sharing.

Such sharing is participating in the breaking of the bread of Jesus, because breaking of bread doesn't just happen at the meal table. Breaking of bread doesn't just happen when we come to communion.

The bread that we break is being broken whenever we cooperate at home, or school, or work, or when we're with friends, or whenever we're working for the poor and those suffering from injustice. That's the breaking of the bread and that is when we see and serve Jesus.

If we live in a world where we are sharing, then we are making present, day by day, the ordinance of the communion of Jesus Christ.

I am one of those individuals who rarely ever dream at night, unless God is providing me with a message. After dreaming I wake up and immediately write down what I have dreamt. For this reason I always keep pencil and notepaper at my bedside and will later transfer what I have written to my journal.

In July 2003, I had this dream:

"Once upon a time there was a wise old miser who lived in a cave behind a waterfall. As he neared the end of his life, he sent word into the nearby town that whoever could carry a clean milk-jug under the waterfall without getting water in it would have it filled with gold.

The next day, many townsfolk lined up at the waterfall with their milk-jugs. Many carried them in bags, but as the miser could not see the jug passing under the waterfall they got no gold.

Others carried them upside-down, but an upside-down jug could hold no gold either. One smart person had filled his jug with water and frozen it overnight so that no water from the waterfall could land in the jug. But a jug with frozen water couldn't hold gold.

Another had filled his with axle grease but it could not be filled with gold as it was no longer clean.

However one person had filled his jug with sweet clean honey. When he came through the waterfall no water could enter the jug, and as the gold

was poured in, sweet honey overflowed for others to share and enjoy."

An example of sharing in breaking bread with Jesus, was given to me by a church deacon, Dennis Yoshioka in 1998.

He said that between the church and the cafeteria was a walkway and in the centre of the path where the congregation had to pass on their way to Sabbath potluck was a sleeping man who reeked of liquor and sweat. Dishevelled clothing with last week's spaghetti stains and gutter smears testified to his homelessness.

One of the saints approached Dennis as Head Deacon to point out the pathetic situation and demanded to know what he intended to do about it. "We cannot not allow such a thing, to have someone like that sleeping on our pathway in plain view of the public on a Sabbath Day. This is unthinkable. Swift action must be taken. What are you going to do about it?"

Immediately Dennis assured the 'saint', "You are right, we should not tolerate such a thing." And

the deacon took off toward the prone body while he could sense the wry smile from his fellow church member as the 'saint' anticipated what was to follow.

When Dennis reached the sleeping man, Dennis bent down and aroused him with a gentle nudge at his shoulder and a soft, "Excuse me."

With blood-shot eyes the man squinted to see who had disturbed his sleep, and as the fog lifted he acknowledged the deacon's presence.

Once the man had become aware of Dennis, the deacon invited the man to the potluck dinner and he eagerly accepted the invitation. Dennis then escorted the man to the cafeteria, with Dennis later saying that he often wondered what the 'saint' thought as the guest walked into the dining room.

God is pleased when we share. Hebrews 13:16 says, "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." And chapter 13:2 says, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

In 1997 I was prompted by the Spirit to pray the following: Lord, You are the bread of life. Make me, Lord, a slice of thee; May life for me be Spirit filled -- the leaven swelling up in me.

The silent unseen working, transforming lazy flour into holy air-filled bubbling life; risen, baked, and given power!

So life no longer is a loaf of wasted energy. Lord, may the crumbs I leave behind, draw other souls to Thee.

Prayer

"May Christ Jesus strengthen us to the end; and may the Holy Spirit guide us in faithful living until he comes.

May we be willing to share not just bread but our time, money, and other blessings that You have provided.

In Jesus' Name, Amen."

Week 42
He Will Carry You Through

It was a bright, clear morning. A large crowd had gathered at Niagara Falls to see the famous Blondin walk over it on a tightrope. The sun glistened on the cascading torrent as it rushed over the precipice. From below came the ceaseless thunder of the plunging cataract.

The world's greatest tightrope walker briefly tested the taut strand that reached across to the opposite bank. Then he took his long pole and, balancing himself expertly, started across. The crowd followed every movement tensely. Step by step he moved forward.

The people on the shore reacted nervously to every sharp motion of the balancing pole. But their fears and forebodings were unnecessary. The great Blondin not only went across safely, but returned as well, to the great relief and admiration of the

spectators.

Turning to the audience, he then made a sensational offer. He would cross the falls again, this time with someone on his back. Who was willing to go? No one rushed forward to accept the offer. Picking out a man at random, Blondin asked, "Do you believe that I am able to carry you across?"

"Yes, sir," came the unhesitating reply. "Well, then, let's go,' Blondin urged. "Not on your life!" - and the man withdrew into the crowd.

And so it went. One after another expressed great confidence in the tightrope walker, but no one would agree to let Blondin take him across. Finally, a young fellow moved toward the front of the crowd. Blondin repeated his question: "Do you believe I can carry you across safely?"

"Yes, I do." "Are you willing to let me?" "As a matter of fact, I am." The young man climbed onto the expert's back. Blondin stepped onto the rope, paused momentarily, then moved across the falls without difficulty.

There were many in that crowd who believed that Blondin could do it. But there was only one who was willing to trust him to carry him across.

Today I want us to contemplate being carried. Some of us are like lost sheep who need carrying, some of us are not well and need to be carried, others of us are lonely and to be carried means to feel the touch of someone who cares. Some of us are weary and may be sick and tired of being sick and tired. We need the prayers of others to carry us through.

Did you know that King David prayed for you? I take comfort knowing that the man after God's own heart, the man who had such a close communion with God, prayed for me so many centuries ago.

I read this in Psalm 28, verse 6 and following, "Blessed be the Lord, because he hath heard the voice of my supplications. The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him."

David spent a good deal of time calling on God's help. And, in the same breath he usually praised

God in the process. Psalm 28 is no different.

Yet, there is a slight change in David's praise to God as we come to verses 8 and 9. He says, "The Lord is their strength, and he is the saving strength of his anointed. Save thy people, and bless thine inheritance: feed them also, and lift them up for ever."

Here the shepherd king prays for God's salvation and blessing on you and me. Psalm 28:9 in the New American Standard Bible reads, "Save Your people and bless Your inheritance; be their shepherd also, and carry them forever."

I want to focus for a moment on the thought, "carry them forever." Robert Schuller wrote, "God's care will carry you so you can carry others".

Some time ago, I read Zig Ziglar's book, *'See You At The Top'*. He tells about an old man who stood on a Virginia riverbank many years ago. He was waiting to cross the river and, since it was bitterly cold and there were no bridges, he would have to "catch a ride" to the other side.

After a lengthy wait he spotted a group of

horsemen approaching. He let the first one pass, then the second, third, fourth and fifth. One rider remained. As he drew alongside, the old man looked him in the eye and said, "Sir, would you [please] give me a ride across the river?"

The rider immediately replied, "Certainly." Once across the river, the old man slid to the ground.

"Sir," the rider said before leaving. "I could not help but notice that you permitted all the other men to pass without asking for a ride. Then, when I drew abreast, you immediately asked me to carry you across. I am curious as to why you didn't ask them and you did ask me."

The old man quietly responded, "I looked into their eyes and could see no love and knew in my own heart it would be useless to ask for a ride. But when I looked into your eyes, I saw compassion, love and the willingness to help. I knew you would be glad to give me a ride across the river."

The rider was touched. "I'm grateful for what you are saying," he said. "I appreciate it very much." With that, Thomas Jefferson turned and rode off to

the White House.

It is said that others will know us by our love. Zi Yen wrote, "Love doesn't hide. It stays and fights. It goes the distance. That's why God made love so strong. So it can carry you, all the way home."

A fifteen-year-old boy came bounding into the house and found his mum in bed. He asked if she were sick or something. He was truly concerned. Mum replied that, as a matter of fact, she didn't feel too well.

The son replied, "Well, don't worry a bit about dinner. I'll be happy to carry you down to the stove." I guess the boy's heart was in the right place even if his mind wasn't.

It is a comfort, to be sure, to think that the Creator has us in His mighty and loving hands. To be carried by the Lord as we have written here.

We can read in Isaiah 40:11, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."

And again in Isaiah 46:3-4, "Hearken unto me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, which are borne by me from the belly, which are carried from the womb: And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you."

This is the figurative picture of God's watch-care over those who have put their faith in His Son. Our God is our comfort, our cleft in the storm, where He hides us there with His hand.

In a passage in Deuteronomy, we get a more literal sense of this Divine carrying. In Deuteronomy 1:30-31 we can read, "The Lord your God who goes before you will Himself fight on your behalf, just as He did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as a man carries his son, in all the way which you have walked until you came to this place."

Can we be fully aware of how God has fought on our behalf in our day-to-day existence? Consider where you are today. Has God carried you "until you

came to this place?"

God is our provider. He gives us what we need, especially material blessings and sometimes no more, because moderate riches will carry you but if you have more, you must carry them.

I suspect we might have some idea of God working on our behalf, but I'm certain we aren't aware of all He does and how, like a son, God carries us through the events of our lives.

Who, but God, to carry us over or through the wilderness? Who, but God, should we praise for reaching the other side?

In 1868, Horatio R. Palmer wrote this important advice: He said, *"Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin; each victory will help you some other to win; fight manfully onward, dark passions subdue; look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.*

Shun evil companions, bad language disdain, God's name hold in reverence, nor take it in vain; be thoughtful and earnest, kind-hearted and true; look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.

To him that overcometh, God giveth a crown,

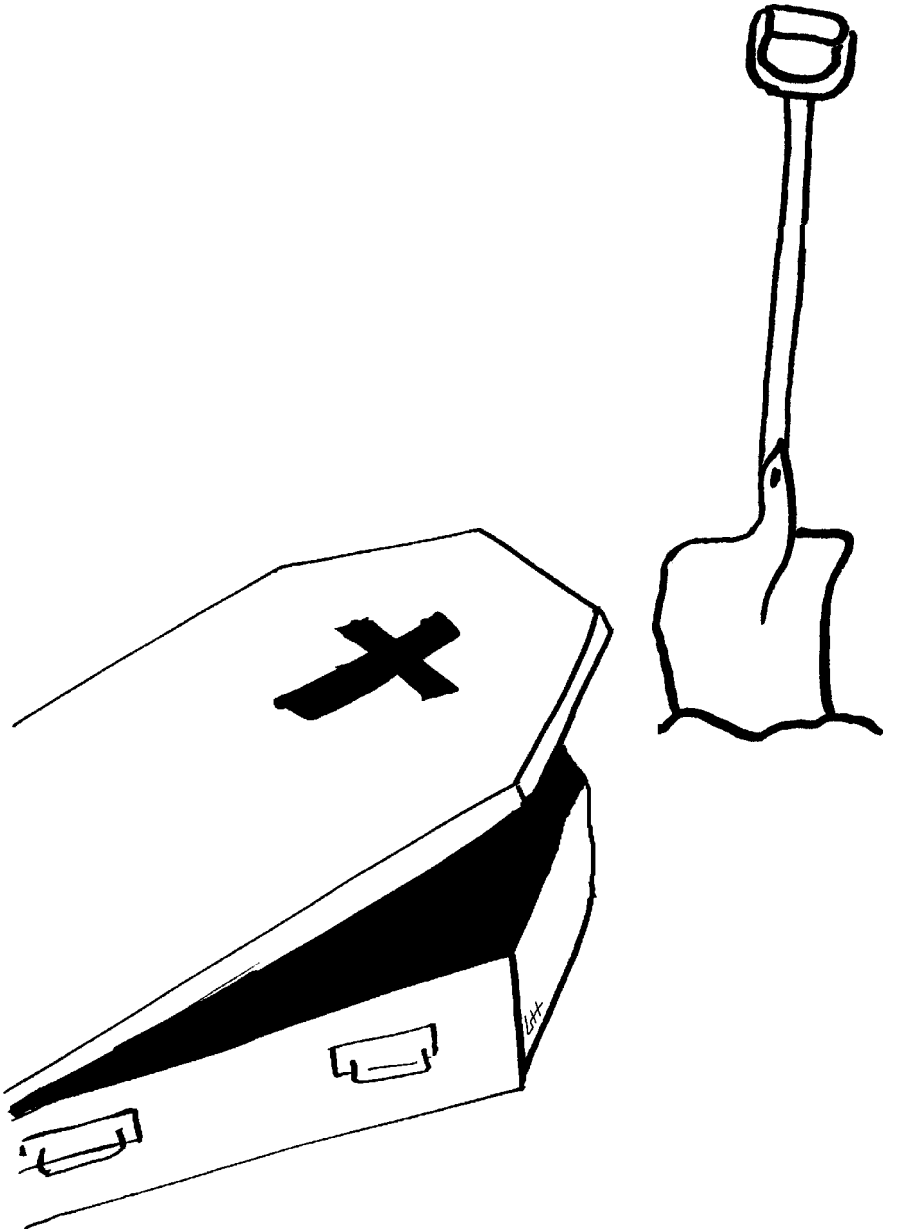
through faith we will conquer, though often cast down; He who is our Saviour, our strength will renew; look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through."

Ask the Saviour to help you, comfort, strengthen, and keep you; He is willing to aid you, He will carry you through.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you that although we are often cast down, we know that when we ask You to help, comfort, strengthen, and keep us; You are so willing to come to our aid and carry us through. Thank you, Lord.

And we now pray the words of Psalm 129:8, "... The blessing of the Lord be upon you: we bless you in the name of the Lord". Amen.



Week 43
Have You Been Buried Alive?

In the days of yesteryear, a prosperous businessman in Mexico was wrongly pronounced dead and in due course of time he was buried. They did not have the knowledge to ascertain that he was still alive.

The night watchman of the cemetery went to the police to report hearing knocking coming from the new grave. An order finally came to exhume the grave and they discovered that the glass top of his coffin had been broken. He had been buried alive, and later regained consciousness, and after a frantic struggle, and he had died of suffocation.

To peoples of the Victorian era, the fear of premature burial became all-consuming, and many bizarre measures were taken to prevent it. Thanks to the *'Society for the Prevention of People Being Buried Alive'* and other concerned citizens, death was handled more tentatively than ever before. For example, the deceased were left lying in their caskets for days or

weeks on end before being deemed sufficiently dead to bury. When the Duke of Wellington died in 1858, this macabre postponement ritual reached an extreme. The Duke was not buried until two months after his death.

A simpler method of allaying premature-burial anxiety was to place crowbars and shovels in the deceased's caskets; if they revived, they could dig their way out. Also, in use was a pipe that went through the ground and into the casket, to be used for emergency communications. Wealthy families even hired servants to wait by the pipes and listen for calls for help. Wealthy families who wanted their dead to stay that way had yet another option: coffins fitted with special nails that, when driven, punctured capsules of poison gas.

The most popular device by far, however, was the *Bateson Revival Device*, advertised as 'a most economical, ingenious, and trustworthy mechanism, superior to any other method, and promoting peace of mind amongst the bereaved in all stations of life. A device of proven efficacy, in countless instances in this country and abroad.'

The device, patented by George Bateson, came to be known as the *Bateson's Belfry*. It consisted of an iron bell mounted on the lid of the casket just above the deceased's head. The bell was connected to a cord through the coffin that was placed in the dead person's hand, and I quote, 'such that the least tremor shall directly sound the alarm.' Although there is no record of this device actually saving someone's life, it did, nevertheless, enjoy brisk sales for many years and made Bateson a rich man.

It is important to make sure that there is death before burial. Would you agree? I think that is fairly important. In a few moments we will see that this is one of the greatest reason for failure in the Christian life.

In John 19:30, are recorded the last moments of Jesus' life. Jesus was hanging on the cross, and in verse 30 it says, that He gave up the ghost, he died. "When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' And with that, he bowed His head and gave up His spirit."

Do you think he actually died? If he didn't die, then we won't live, right? He did actually die.

He was buried just before sundown on that Good Friday (We call it good because that's the day that our salvation was paid for), and He rested in the tomb all during the holy Sabbath hours.

And then very early on Sunday morning an angel came and rolled back that monstrous stone opening up the tomb, and Jesus came forth our resurrected Saviour.

What death did to Jesus is nothing compared to what Jesus did to death.

His victory over the tomb was not just for Himself but also for every human being in the entire world. Anyone who will accept Jesus as their personal Saviour, and invite Him into their heart and trust Him forevermore, that victory is for them.

And just as sure as Jesus is truly alive today, Jesus was truly dead before His burial that Friday afternoon. I believe that. He died.

Today there is quite a bit of fear among a lot of people about being buried alive. In England there is a century-old organization called the *'Society for the*

Prevention of Premature Encofferment, Burial, and Cremation.' We all agree that there should be death before burial.

This is especially true in a spiritual sense. The old sinful man or woman must die so you can have a new life.

Many who assume the name of Christ have been baptised, but they were buried alive, because self did not die. The old man did not die. The old man went down into there alive and came up alive.

Do you see what the problem is in the Spiritual life? People are buried alive in the church. Because self did not die, they do not rise with a new life in Christ. Therefore they experience a languishing life, even in the church.

Their spirituality is not the same because when they were baptised, the old man did not die to self. You don't want that old man. You don't want that struggle with the old ways of life. You want a new life, so the old life has to die.

To be properly baptised, first you die to the

old ways of sin. Then you are buried under the waters of baptism, and you come up a brand new person in Jesus Christ. That's the only way it can happen.

But when and if we slip, which we will, in the weeks after our baptism, do we need to be re-baptised all over again? Do we need to die again and be buried and come up again?

Actually, and bear with me on this, yes we do. However, if every time we told a lie or did something dishonest, if we had to be buried and re-baptised in a baptistery, our pastors would be waterlogged from baptizing. They would be consuming all their time by baptizing people every day.

Fortunately Jesus holds the patent on a service that basically replaces baptism after you've been baptised. It's a miniature baptism. It's called The Foot-washing Service!

In John 13 you can see the evidence that Jesus took out a new invention: The Foot-washing Service. He washed His disciple's feet. We don't have any record of this happening before this time. In the spiritual way that He did it, it was something very

new and very important. This miniature baptism is to gain the full rich blessing from this service in a continuing way.

Now, you would think that during the communion service this would be the most widely attended meeting of any meeting we ever have. People ought to be here because this is very important. This is where we renew our wedding vows, our spiritual covenant with Jesus Christ.

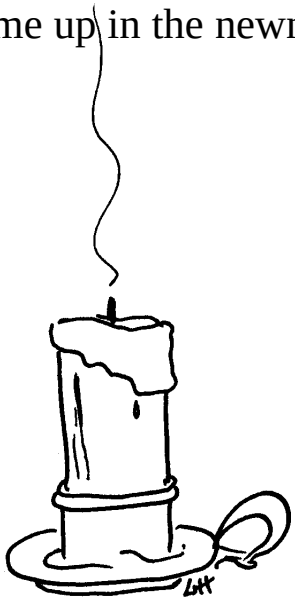
So we must die to our old ways of life before we can experience a new life here today at this communion service. Would you agree with that? We don't want people to come and experience this service just to go away unchanged. And to do that, the first thing we need to do is to pray that God will slay, mortify, kill, the old way of life and extract it from our life and give us a new life.

And so, when you place your feet under the water in a foot washing service, you are in effect burying your old life. That is what it means. This is a symbol of baptism. Make sure that you are not buried alive! Make sure that before you ever enter this ordiunance, that you ask the Lord to bless you, that

you ask the Lord to take away the sins of the old nature.

Have you or I been struggling with sin lately? Are there some sins in our life that we have a terrible time with? Maybe that needs to die. Maybe we need to just turn that over to the Lord and let Him be an executioner of that old way of life, and then we can be raised to a brand new life. We can do that.

Could it be that the reason some do not experience new life from a communion service is because they were buried alive? And they never do die to the old way of life? The old ways of sin must die. Self must be certified dead and buried and only then can we come up in the newness of life.



Prayer

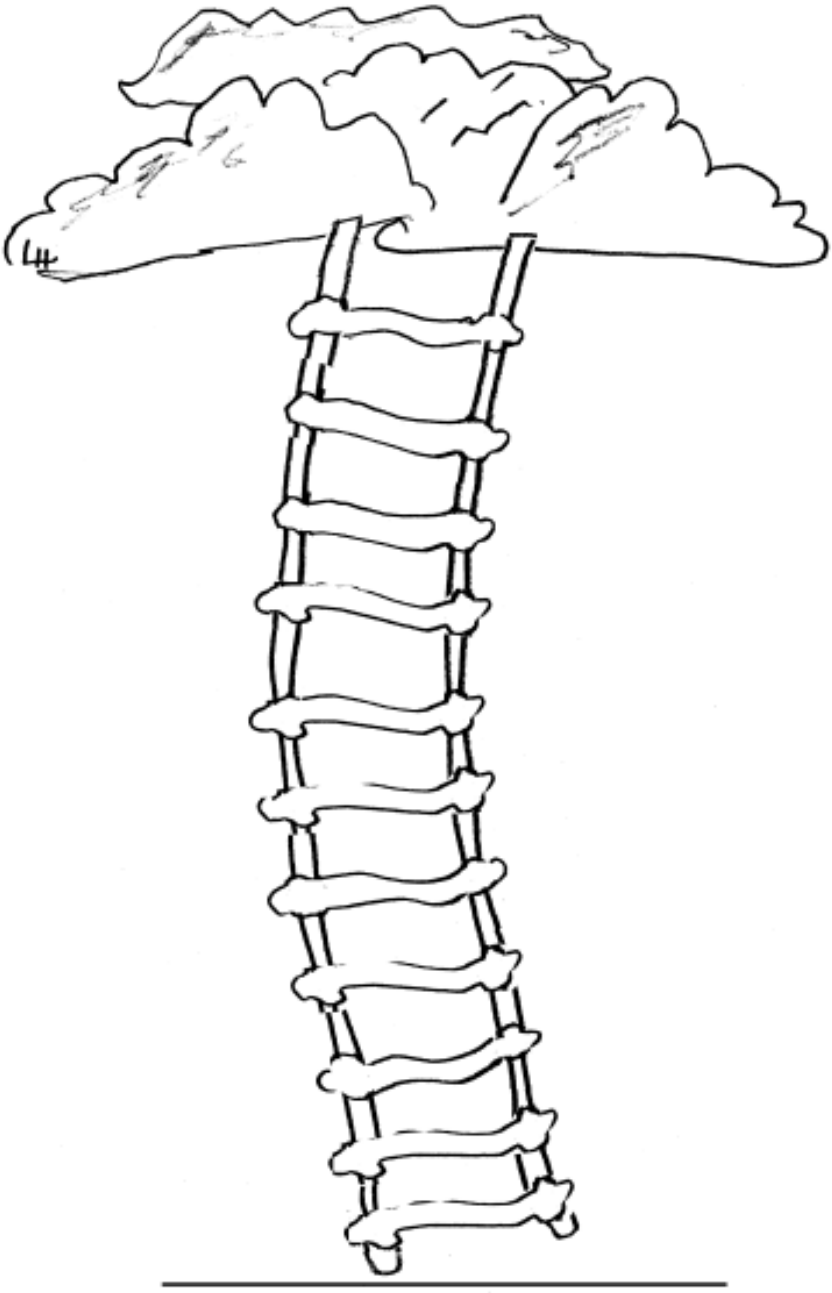
Our Father, please get rid
of the bad things in our life.

Kill the old man or woman of sin
inside of us. Give us the
new spiritual nature of Christ.

Help us to experience something
dramatic, something different today,
the strength, the spiritual strength
that only You can give.

We surrender the old life to You,
asking You to slay it and bury it, and
asking that we might come up today
in a newness of life that maybe we
have never experienced this before.

For we ask this in the precious name
of Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen."



Week 44
Hope and Heaven

Colossians 1:1-5, *"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother, 2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, 4 Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, 5 For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel".*

It was five days before Christmas. The man drove up and down the lanes of the crowded Target parking lot, looking for a place to park his car. Once inside the store, he found the aisles jammed with shopping carts and last minute shoppers like him-self.

As hurriedly as the packed store would allow, he grabbed the few gifts he had come to purchase and steered his cart to the checkout lines, resigning

himself to a long wait for his turn at the cash register.

In front of him were two small children, a boy of about 10 and his little sister. The boy wore a ragged coat and worn out tennis shoes that were enormously large for his small feet. In his grimy hands he clutched a small wad of dollar bills. The girl was dressed no better than her brother was. Her hair was a matted tangle of curls. Cradled in her arms was a pair of shiny gold house-slippers.

When it came their turn at the register, the little girl carefully placed the slippers on the counter. The clerk ran the barcode over the scanner and announced, "That will be $6.09." The boy stared at the crumpled bills in his hand. It wasn't enough. "I guess we'll have to put them back and come back some other time," he said.

The little girl choked back a sob. "But Jesus would have loved these shoes," she said.

"Don't cry," said her little brother. "We'll come back and get them later."

The man gave a couple of bills to the cashier.

"Here, I'll make up the difference." Almost immediately, he was wrapped in a pair of tiny arms and a small voice whispered, "Thank you, Sir."

The man patted the matted head. His curiosity aroused, he asked, "What did you mean when you said that Jesus would like the slippers?"

The little boy answered for his sister. "Our mummy is sick. Dad said she might go to sleep before Christmas and wait for Jesus to take her to Heaven to be with Him."

The girl added, "My Sunday School teacher said the streets in Heaven are shiny gold. Won't my mommy be beautiful walking on those streets in these slippers?"

The man looked down into the tear-streaked face. "Yes, I'm sure she will."

Praise the Lord for a Sunday School teacher who had something more to give a little girl than a piece of candy or a cute little story. Thank the Lord that she could tell her about Heaven, Jesus coming again and plant a seed of hope in this child. Where

will we be without a hope of Heaven? How can we face death — how can we really enjoy life — if we don't have hope beyond the grave? Hope and Heaven go together. For the Christian, our hope is in Heaven.

It's the place where we will rest from all our labours. It's the place where we will be freed from all our trials. It's the place where we will be finally and completely healed of every sickness. It's the place of gladness and life never-ending. It's the place where we will forever be with our best friend Jesus. That's what it means to have a hope of Heaven.

In our text from Colossians, Paul thanked God continually that the believer's in Colosse had a hope laid up for them in Heaven. You have to understand what that meant to those people. We are accustomed to cemeteries. We put up tombstones engraved with words of hope. But the pagan world in Colosse of that day knew little if anything of life beyond the grave. Death terrified them. There were no promises of peace and rest etched on Colossian grave markers.

Then they heard the Gospel – the story of One who conquered death, rose in victory over the grave, and offered a promise of life in Heaven to all who

would trust Him. Superstitions were abandoned and hope replaced fear when they placed their faith in Jesus to save them.

Hope and Heaven go together. They are the precious, exclusive possession of the Christian.

Let me share three biblical facts about Heaven.

Firstly, Heaven is a ***place for the Believer***

There are those that believe that Heaven is nothing more than a state of mind. Others say that Heaven is whatever goodness you can grab hold of in this life. But Heaven is a place. Let me give you three simple reasons why heaven is a place. Firstly, Jesus came from Heaven. John 6:38; Secondly, Jesus returned to Heaven.1 Peter 3:22 and three, Jesus is coming again from Heaven. 1 Thessalonians 4:16

Every time the Bible mentions Heaven, it speaks of it as a real place. From Scripture alone we do not know where it is, except that the Bible always speaks of it as being "up." Jesus came down from Heaven. He ascended up to Heaven. When He comes back for His church, we are going up to meet Him in

the clouds.

Up there, somewhere on the map of God, is a place called Heaven.

John Henry Jowett, prominent preacher of a few generations ago, served as pastor of distinguished churches both in England and America. He used to tell of a stormy evening when he was entertained in the home of an English countryman. Sometime after nightfall, the hour came for him to leave, to catch his train back to the city. As he arose to go, his farmer host walked with him to the front gate. There the farmer gave him a lighted lantern, pointed to a light in the distance, and said, "Yonder light is Saddleworth Station; make for that. The lantern will keep you from falling into the ditch; but keep your eye on the glimmer in the distance."

In the daily walk of our life, sometimes in darkness or storm, we have to give a lot of attention to staying out of the ditch. We need to use the light, God's Word, to keep from falling in. But there is something more. If we look carefully, in the distance we can see a glimmer. This is important; for the glimmer is the high goal, the object of the long quest,

the Light that directs the course of our journey to heaven. You may you go for a walk with a light for your next footsteps. But this alone is not enough: Never take your eyes off the place that is just a glimmer that is in the distance.

So firstly, Heaven is a place. Secondly, Heaven is ***promised to the Believer.***

When the Christian speaks of a “hope” of Heaven, he speaks of something sure, a certainty. He means that Heaven fills the longing of his heart because he expects to go there some day. A Greek philosopher, Anaxagoras, was asked why he thought he was born. His answer was, "That I may meditate upon heaven."

A man who was dying called upon his secretary to write a letter to a friend. "I continue to be in the land of the living," his secretary wrote in her desire to help him. But he corrected her. Instead, he instructed her to write, "I am still found in the land of the dying, but on resurrection morn I shall awake in the land of the living."

Often, when I am sharing the Gospel with

others, I will ask them if they *know* they are going to Heaven someday. I cannot tell you how many times I have received the answer, "Oh, I certainly hope so." They are not sure. They just "hope" that when they die, it will all somehow work out.

That's not what Paul meant when he thanked God for a hope laid up for us in Heaven. He meant that we could look forward to Heaven with confidence because it has been promised to us.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 tells us that Jesus is coming for us, we are going to be caught up to meet Him in the air and then we will be with Him forever — in Heaven. That's God's promise.

In 1 Peter 1:3-5 Peter also links together the words hope and Heaven. And he tells us something more about God's promise of Heaven. He calls it an inheritance. It comes to us at no cost to ourselves. There is no down payment, real-estate agent's fees or closing costs. There are no mortgage payments, property taxes, nor fear of foreclosure. It's God's free gift to the Believer.

He tells us that it is reserved for us in Heaven,

and we are kept by the power of God for it. Heaven is promised, and it's God's own power that guarantees the promise will be fulfilled.

I said that firstly, Heaven is a place. Secondly, Heaven is promised, and now thirdly, Heaven is being ***prepared for the Believer.***

John 14:1-3 tells of mansions in Heaven, and the architect and builder of them all is Jesus Christ. He is preparing them for us. But what kind of place is God preparing. We really don't know. In fact, the Bible says it is so wonderful that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for us.

But in the opening verses of Revelation 21we are given a few tantalizing glimpses. It is a place where everything is new

A new heaven – a whole new universe of stars and galaxies. A new earth – pristine, fresh, unmarked by sin. A new city – with streets of gold, foundations of precious stones, and gates of pearl. A new relationship – God dwelling with men, no longer separated because of sin. A new condition where every

broken heart will be healed, death will be forbidden, sorrow will be unknown and suffering will be no more.

Revelation 21:27 mentions one final fact about Heaven which I would like us to consider. It debunks the myth that good people go to Heaven and bad people go to Hell. It says, "And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie."

This verse disqualifies anyone from getting into Heaven by their goodness. No one is good enough. But I didn't read all the verse. It goes on to say, "But they which are written in the Lamb's Book of Life."

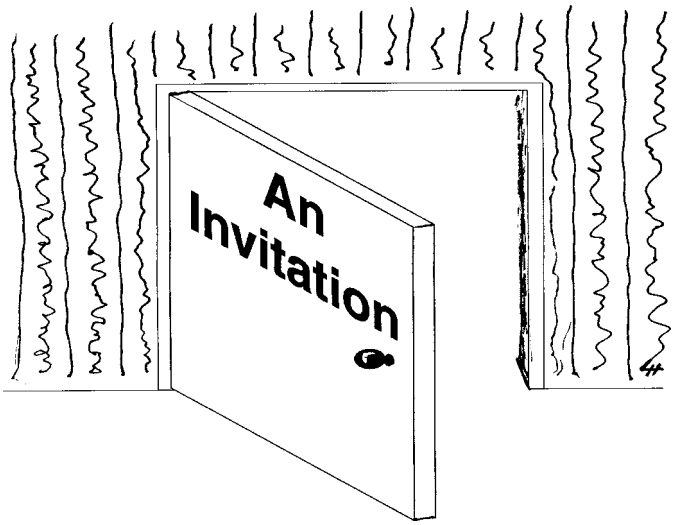
God's has a book, and in it are recorded the names of everyone who has trusted Jesus Christ as their Saviour. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me."

A person may go to heaven without wealth, without beauty, without learning, without fame, without culture, without friends or influence. But no one can go to heaven without Christ.

The door to Heaven is wide open, but the only way to enter is by putting our faith in Jesus Christ to save you.

Jesus is not ***a*** way, but ***the*** way. God took our sin debt and placed them on Jesus. He died in our place. And when we trust Him as our Saviour, God no longer looks upon us as a sinner. He writes our name in the Lamb's Book of Life and the Bible says that He forgets our sin.

You can get to Heaven from anywhere on earth, but there is only one way. We must believe in Jesus as our Saviour. Don't put off the decision to receive or re-commit to Christ. Trust Him today.



Prayer

Thank You Lord you have promised a place that you are preparing for us.

May we so live our lives that we show our gratitude for this free gift.

Please instil in us a desire to tell others of this wonderful promise.

And now, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we seek from You Your promised blessing.

Amen.

Week 45
The Disease of Discouragement

Today I would like us to start with reading from 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ."

When life is tiring, when we are struggling with some sin, when family members are complicated, when bills aren't paid, when school is difficult, when work is exhausting, when our health is not good, when our loved ones are hurt, when the future is unsure, and when a good friend leaves, it is easy to be discouraged.

Discouragement is a thief. It steals our vitality, our zeal, our joy, our peace, and our contentment. If discouragement dwells long, its gloomy companions

will soon join it. Their names are fatigue, hopelessness, despair, self-pity, depression, doubt, and bitterness. For some people, discouragement can be so strong that they even don't want to go on living.

Discouragement can be a dissatisfaction with the past, a distaste for the present, and a distrust of the future. Discouragement is sometimes the result of emotional blindness resulting in ingratitude for the blessings of yesterday, indifference to the opportunities of today, and insecurity regarding strength for tomorrow. It is often accompanied by an absence of an awareness of the presence of God and the promises of His Word, coupled with a lack of concern for the needs of our fellow man.

Be encouraged because God is a God of mercy and comfort. Verse 3 of chapter one of second Corinthians reads, "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" God is called the Father of Mercies.

Now the second word in most English translation is not in the original. So some translations, such as the King James Version insert the word 'be',

thus reading, "Blesséd be God". Others, equally accurate but rendering a very different meaning, insert the word 'by', thus reading, "Blessed by God". In one we are praising God, in the other we are acknowledging that He is blessing us. Whatever the apostle Paul's intent, one thing is very clear, and that is that God is even more worthy of our praise because of the unconditional way that he has mercy on us.

In the Greek the word for "mercy" means, of course, mercy but also compassion and pity. These are emotions that are felt in the heart. In God's very heart, He feels mercy toward you and me.

God is the author of mercy. Psalm 86:5 tells us, "You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you."

God's mercy toward us brings us comfort, peace, salvation, the forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal separation. And all of this is because of Jesus, because of His sacrifice and because of His shed blood for me and you.

The word in Greek for "comfort" is paraklesis. It means, exhortation, comfort, and encouragement.

In fact, a form of this word, parakletos is used to describe the Holy Spirit. That is why the Holy Spirit is called the Comforter in John 14:26. In some translations the word is rendered "Helper."

All this shows us that God is a God of comfort, of exhortation, and of encouragement. All comfort comes from God who is the God of comfort, of mercy, and love. It isn't an angel, or a cosmic force, a pill, a psychological therapy, or a quick and clever slogan that warms your heart and lifts you up. It is God.

But you may ask, "How is this comfort received from God?"

Here are four ways:

Firstly, by faith. Because God says He is the God of comfort, then we need to believe it and act upon it; that is, we need to trust Him and receive His comfort as He provides it, in the way that He sees best, remembering that He loves us.

Secondly, from others. God uses godly people to comfort you and me. When you have a problem, do not be afraid to ask the Lord to send someone with an encouraging word, a helping hand, or a shoulder

to cry on.

Thirdly, through His word. Reading and hearing the words of sacred scripture can be inspiring if done prayerfully. The words of God are beautiful and are there for our instruction and encouragement.

And fourthly, by the Holy Spirit. He is called the Comforter. Invite Him into your life.

Take encouragement also because God is there in your afflictions. Verse 4 of chapter one of second Corinthians reads, "who comforts us in all our affliction . . . . so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

"Affliction" in the New American Standard Bible, "tribulation" in the Authorised version, "trouble" in the New International Version are all from the Greek word *thlipsis*. It can be translated as tribulation, trouble, anguish, persecution, burden, and, of course, affliction.

Afflictions come in all different shapes and sizes. Sickness, financial difficulty, loss of a loved

one, an unsure future, an auto accident. But also can occur in the heart in that place where we get frustrated, confused, and hurt.

We have afflictions because we live in a fallen world and it takes a world with trouble in it to really develop our character. A sailor never learns to sail by staying in the safety of the harbour.

James 1:2-4 says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

So then, afflictions are a way of making us better, not bitter. And that is how they should be tackled: as the testing and strengthening of our faith and character through the comfort and mercy of God.

We can also be encouraged because we can be instruments of comfort to others. Again I read from verse 4 of chapter one of second Corinthians, " . . . so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves

are comforted by God."

It glorifies God to comfort others, and being used by God makes us feel good. Of course that isn't the only reason to help someone, but it does feel good when the Holy Spirit uses us to do good to others.

I guess we ought to praise God that we even have afflictions so that we can be able to help others. Many of us, because we have been through a trial, have been able to help another person who is experiencing a similar trial.

God does not comfort us to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters.

The building of lighthouses are encouraged by shipwrecked sailors. The impetus behind the construction of retaining walls is from those who have suffered by landslides. The widened of roads are urged by injured motorists or their hurting families. The building of levee banks is motivated by the victims of floods. The provision of hospitals and ambulances are encouraged by those who are sick. The establishment of fire brigades are lobbied by those who have suffered by fire.

Where nobody suffers, nobody cares. When we suffer we learn to care. That is why God does not comfort us to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters ... and He suffered first, long before we were even born. Praise God that His love is never measured by our comfort.

In 430 B.C. the historian Thucydides wrote, "It was in those who had recovered from the plague that the sick and the dying found most compassion."

And finally, we should be encouraged because the comfort we receive from God comes through Christ. Verse 5 reads, "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ."

This means that all comfort, encouragement, and hope that we receive through people, through the Word, or through circumstances are a blessing from God.

We don't have to worry whether or not He is going to take care of us. He already has through the cross, He is currently doing so, and He will continue to care for us. After all, He cares for the sparrows

and he reminds us that we are more valuable than they.

In 1905, Civilla D. Martin wrote a poem that starts with some very relevant questions, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart be lonely and long for heaven and home, When Jesus is my portion? My constant Friend is He. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me"

In her poem she goes on to say:

"'Let not your heart be troubled,'
His tender word I hear,
And resting on His goodness,
I lose my doubts and fears;
Though by the path He leadeth,
but one step I may see;
His eye is on the sparrow,
and I know He watches me.

Whenever I am tempted,
whenever clouds arise,
When songs give place to sighing,
when hope within me dies,
I draw the closer to Him,
from care He sets me free;

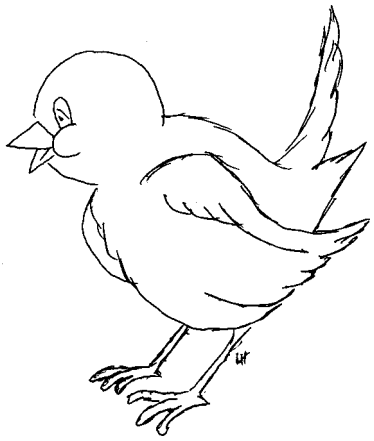
His eye is on the sparrow,
and I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow,
and I know He watches me.

Prayer

Thank you God that you are
our comfort and stay.

Fill us with your comfort now,
we pray.

And may the blessing of God
Almighty, the Father, Son and Holy
Spirit fill us with His comfort and
peace, now and forevermore, Amen.



Week 46
Jehovah-Rapha, the Lord who Heals

In Exodus 15:26 and again in Isaiah 30:26, one of the names of God is *Jehovah-Rapha*, "the Lord who heals".

Reading from the Holy Bible words recorded in Exodus 15:22-26 - So Moses brought Israel from the Red sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And [Moses] cried unto the Lord; and the Lord showed him a [certain] tree, which when he had cast [it] into the waters, the waters were made sweet:…, And [God] said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that

healeth thee [Amen].

In this portion of Scripture, God declares that He is the healer of his people. This passage refers specifically to healing from physical disease:

The Bible records a considerable number of physical healing accounts in the Old Testament. Likewise, in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, healing miracles are prominently highlighted. And throughout the ages of church history, believers have continued to testify of God's power to divinely heal the sick.

So, if God by His own nature declares Himself Healer, why doesn't God heal everyone?

Why did God use Paul to heal many sick people including the father of Publius who was ill with fever and dysentery, yet God chose not to use Paul to heal his close companion Timothy who suffered from frequent stomach illnesses?

Perhaps you are suffering from a sickness or injury right now. Maybe life leaves a bitter taste in your mouth. Maybe you've prayed every healing Bible

verse that you know, and still you're left wondering, “Why won't God heal me?”

Maybe you are listening today as you sit alongside someone that you love and witness him or her suffering. It's only natural to ask the question: “Why does God heal some people but not others?”

The quick, clichéd and obvious answer to the question rests in God's sovereignty. God is in control and ultimately he knows what's best for his creations. While this is certainly true, I personally struggle with accepting this as the only reason, even though I am willing to freely submit to his sovereign will.

Fortunately, there are several other clear-cut reasons given in Scripture to further explain why God may not heal.

Let’s start with the most uncomfortable reason first. Now, even though this may not apply to you, the Holy Bible makes it clear that sometimes sickness is allowed to continue because of un-confessed sin. This is not a comforting answer, but it is found in Scripture in James 5:16, along with the problem, the solution and a promise.

Reading from James 5:16 in the New Living Testament, this is what it says, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” That’s both the problem (sin) and the solution (confession and prayer), now here’s the promise: (continuing to read from James 5:16, “The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.”

Now sickness is not always the direct result of sin in someone's life, but pain and disease are part of this fallen world in which we currently live. We must be careful not to blame every sickness on sin, but we must also realize it is one possible reason. Thus, a good place to begin if you've come to the Lord for healing is to search your heart and confess your sins.

When Jesus healed the sick, on many occasions he made this statement: "Your faith has made you well."

In Matthew 9:20-22, Jesus healed the woman who had suffered for many years with constant bleeding: This is what Scripture says, “Just then a woman who had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding came up behind him. She touched

the fringe of his robe, for she thought, ‘If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed.’

Jesus turned around, and when he saw her he said, ‘Daughter, be encouraged! Your faith has made you well.’ And the woman was healed at that moment.”

There are many other biblical examples of healing in response to faith because there is an important link between faith and healing although we must be very careful not to assume every time someone isn't healed the reason is a lack of faith.

Sometimes a failure to be healed is due to a failure to ask for healing.

If we don't ask and earnestly desire to be healed, God won't interfere us against our will. When Jesus saw a lame man who had been sick for 38 years he asked, "Would you like to get well?"

Maybe you know someone who is addicted to stress. They don't know how to behave without turmoil in their life, and so they begin to orchestrate their own atmosphere of chaos.

Similarly, some people may not want to be healed because they've linked their personal identity so closely with their illness. These individuals may fear the unknown aspects of life beyond their sickness, or crave the attention and sympathy that the affliction provides, or even be afraid to leave the comfort of a disability pension or other support.

James 4:2 plainly states, "You do not have, because you do not ask." If you don't know how to ask take note of Romans 8:26: "… the [Holy] Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.". God can answer the simplest prayer, even if stuttered or sighed.

Scripture also indicates that some illnesses are caused by spiritual or demonic influences. Acts 10:38 says that Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil and in Luke 13 Jesus healed a woman crippled by an evil spirit:

Sometimes our pain is for a higher purpose. C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, 'The Problem of Pain': "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our

conscience, but shouts in our pain, it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

We may not understand it at the time, but sometimes God desires to do more than simply heal our physical bodies. Often, in his infinite wisdom, God will allow physical suffering to develop our character and produce spiritual growth in us.

God can use our trials to redirect us, first, toward a dependence on Him, and second, to the path of purpose and destiny he has planned for our life. So I'm not suggesting that we stop praying for healing, but maybe we can ask God to show us the higher plan or better purpose that He may be accomplishing through our pain.

Sometimes when we pray for healing, our situation goes seems to from bad to worse. When this happens, it's possible that God is planning to do something powerful and wonderful, something that will bring even greater glory to His name or greater blessings to us or to those whom we love.

Often when I pray for someone’s healing I ask that God would provide a miracle if He chooses or

that he would provide an even bigger miracle (whatever that may be).

Over and over, I've seen believers suffer terribly from an illness, yet through their attitude they have pointed lives toward God's eternal salvation plan.

In the wilderness of Shur the Israelites had no water. At Marah they had water, but it was bitter; so that they could not drink it. God can use bitterness in our wilderness experience to drive us to seek Him out.

In their distress at Marah, the people fretted, and quarrelled with Moses. All of us, in seasons of sharp trial, may be tempted to fret, distrust, and murmur.

But in every trial we can cast our care upon the Lord, and pour out our hearts before him. We shall then find that a submissive will, a peaceful conscience, and the comforts of the Holy Spirit that will render the bitterest trial tolerable, bearable of even pleasant.

Moses did what the people had neglected to do; he cried unto the Lord. And God provided

graciously for them.

God directed Moses to a tree that he cast into the waters, when, at once, they were made sweet. Some biblical scholars see this tree as typical of the cross of Christ, which sweetens the bitter waters of affliction to all the faithful, and enables us to rejoice in tribulation.

God is the great Physician. If we are kept well, it is he that keeps us; if we are made well, it is he that recovers us. If He chooses to wait, because of his great love for us, He always has our best good in mind. He is our life and the length of our days.

Though God may, for a time, direct his people to encamp by the bitter waters of Marah, that shall not always be our lot, eventually they had good water, and more than enough of it.

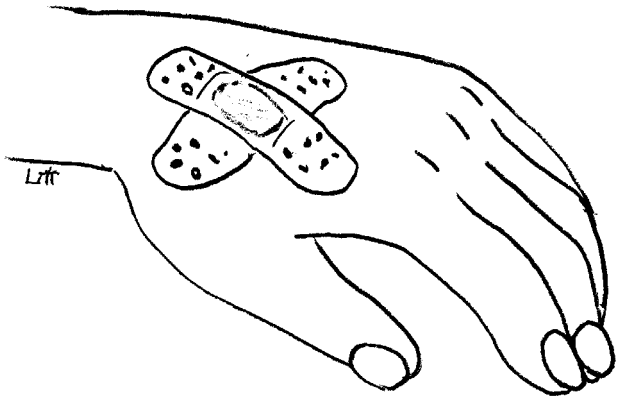
Even if life does not have a bitter taste, we can all place our faith in God today, wait on His will, and see what wondrous and mighty things he can do.

Prayer

Thank you Lord that you are a God who can heal us.

Often we are at a loss to understand why our prayers are not answered in our way, but we do know that you are a creative God of power that always has our best interest at heart.

Therefore we can confidently ask your blessing in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.



Week 47
Spes Unica - Only Hope

A cartoon once showed two Eskimos fishing through holes in the ice. One of the Eskimos had made a hole like you might expect to see, about the size of a manhole cover.

The other had dropped his line in an immense hole that seemed to reach to the edge of the horizon, in the shape of a whale!

1 Peter 1:3 reads, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead".

Charles D Brooks announced that, "We either have an endless hope or a hopeless end".

Rumours spread through a small town in Maine, USA, about its coming demise. The state government had decided to flood the area where the

town stood, create a large lake, build a dam, and add to the state's water and power supplies. With this prospect ahead of them, residents in the town stopped making improvements to their houses. Paint began to peel. Grass grew high in front yards.

One man in the town explained the town's bedraggled appearance. He said, "Where there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present."

There is a word for having faith in the future. It is the word "hope." And now is the time for us to put our hope into practice.

Romans 15:13, "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost."

Several years ago the noted British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge was a guest at a breakfast in Washington, D.C. When he had finished his testimony, he made a number of comments about world affairs, all of which were very pessimistic.

One of the Christians present said to the

speaker, "Dr. Muggeridge, you have been very pessimistic. Don't you have any reason for optimism?"

Malcolm Muggeridge replied, "My friend, I could not be more optimistic than I am, because my hope is in Jesus Christ alone." He allowed that remark to settle for a few seconds, and then he added, "Just think if the apostolic church had pinned its hope on the Roman Empire!"

Also talking of Jesus Christ, Edward Mote wrote the hymn *'My Hope is Built on Nothing Less'*. Listen to these lyrics, "When darkness veils His lovely face, I rest on His unchanging grace. In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil. His oath, His covenant, His blood supports me in the whelming flood. When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay".

In the Bible in the book of Jeremiah Chapter 32 we read that Jeremiah put his hope into practice. About 588 BC, Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem. His city was under attack by the Babylonians. The citizens felt panic. In a year, the Babylonian army would capture Jerusalem and start moving its people to prisoner of war camps. A relative of Jeremiah asked

him to buy a piece of land from him. Though the land was already in enemy hands, Jeremiah put his hope into practice. He bought the field. He put the deed in a pottery jar. In the face of his people's hopelessness, Jeremiah defiantly invested in Israel's future.

Jesus of Nazareth put his hope into practice. Mark's gospel account, in Mark 3:14, says, "And he ordained (or chose) twelve [people], that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach". Jesus invested himself in his relationship with his disciples.

Marcus Borg wrote, "The Jesus movement saw itself as a way for Israel, as a historical alternative in the crisis facing the Jewish social world"

After watching some children at the beach whose sand castle had been knocked down by the water, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote: “All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships [to our God and] to other people, endure.”

In a British church is an inscription. It

celebrates a man named Robert Baronet. There was no monarch during the Commonwealth and Oliver Cromwell ruled. The inscription reads: "In the year 1653 when all things sacred were throughout the nation either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley Baronet founded this church whose singular praise it is to have down the best things in the worst times and hoped [in] them in the most calamitous."

Certainly putting our hope into practice is choosing to do only the best things.

I titled today's devotional *'Spes Unica'* This is taken from a Latin pious expression or motto, *'Ave Crux Spes Unica'* meaning *"Hail to the Cross, our only hope."*

Kevin Eikenberry wrote, "This is how hope works: it looks for the good in people and situations, rather than finding the worst; it discovers what can be done instead of throwing up its hands at what can't; it considers problems large and small, as opportunities to move forward when it would be easier to quit; it makes us human, helping us find the very best in ourselves for those around us and the situations we face."

Vaclav Havel wrote, "I am not an optimist, because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist, because I am not sure everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart . . . Life without hope is an empty, boring and useless life. I cannot imagine that I could strive for something if I did not carry hope in me. I am thankful to God for this gift. It is as big a gift as life itself".

I few years ago, I recall hearing for the first time a song entitled, *'Never give up'*. I don't know much about it apart from the fact that it was written by Chuck Fulmore in the 1970s and first sung by his own singing group. However it is worth pausing to contemplate the words: "There are days, I know, when you get so discouraged, it seems that all hope is gone. But there's only One who can give you courage and strength to carry on. This old world I know can't last much longer, and sin will soon pass away. But my faith in God simply keeps growing stronger, for Jesus is coming some day! Never give up, Jesus is coming. It's the darkest just before dawn. Never give up, Jesus is coming. Never give up, keep holding on.

Just a little bit of trivia: dogs cannot see the

colour red. They have only two cones within the eye that allow them to see colour. We, on the other hand, have three cones in our eyes. This means that we can not only see only red, we see as many as 98 more individual colours than dogs. The Reverend Rick Matters wrote, "God's hope is like [theses colourblind dogs]: Without Jesus, we see life through the eyes of a dog: we're born, we have a little fun, we work hard, we retire, then we die. With Jesus life has much more meaning, love, and joy. When we die, there is more, much more! God's audacious hope goes beyond what we now profess: God's hope might be compared to butterflies, for butterflies have five cones for seeing colours! Think of all the colours we cannot yet see, which God has in store for us".

Does that give us something to hope for?

I would like to close with an anonymous poem entitled, *"Look Up!*

"I look not back - God knows the fruitless efforts, the wasted hours, the sinning and regrets; I leave them all with Him who blots the record, and graciously forgives, and then forgets.

I look not forward - God sees all the future,

the road that, short or long, will lead me home; and He will face with me its every trial, and bear for me the burden that may come.

I look not around me - then would tears assail me, so wild the tumult of life's restless seas; so dark the world, so filled with war and evil, so vain the hope of comfort and of ease.

I look not inward - that would make me wretched, for I have naught on which to stay my trust; nothing I see but failures and shortcomings, and weak endeavours crumbling into dust.

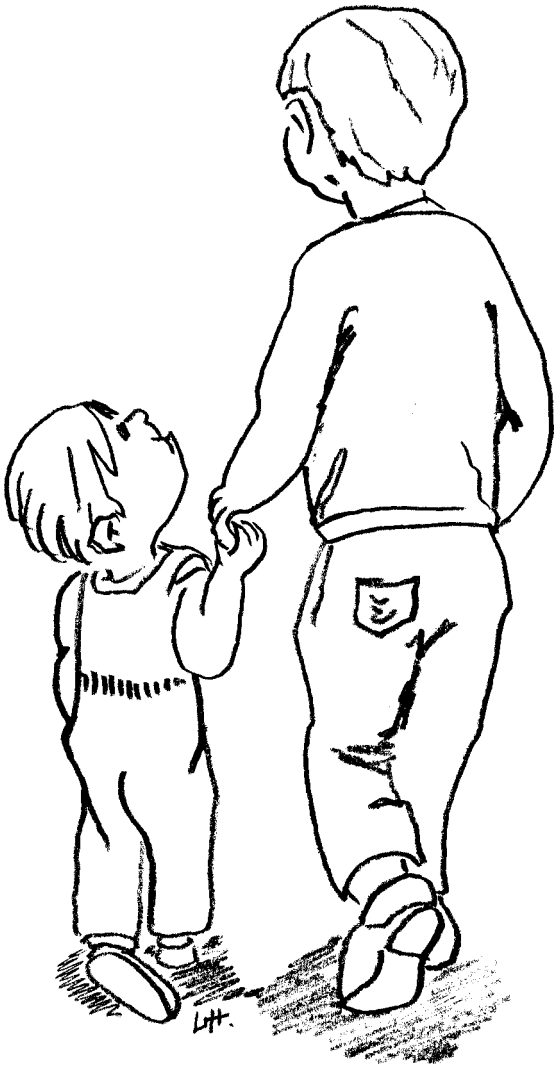
But I look up - up into the face of Jesus! For there my heart can rest, my fears are stilled; and there is joy and love, and light for darkness, and perfect peace, and every hope fulfilled."

Prayer

Lord, may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost*.

And may we each receive from Your hand the blessing promised from God the Father, Jesus the Son and from the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

*Romans 15:13



Week 48
What a Friend We Have in Jesus

According to a recent UK survey more than half of the population pray, which is perhaps a little surprising given that this is nearly double the number of people who say they believe in God.

This suggests that even those who have no belief, or are unsure of what they believe, still look for some comfort in prayer. According to a leading researcher, the number of Internet searches for prayer has skyrocketed since the start of the coronavirus crisis.

Listen to these hymn words: "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

It therefore appears that there is some level of

basic human need to turn to something beyond ourselves in times of crisis for comfort, hope and maybe even solutions.

That is certainly what Joseph Scriven believed. Joseph Scriven wrote the hymn *"What a Friend We Have in Jesus"* in 1855. But when he prayed he wasn't praying to a vague, unknown, distant God, he knew exactly Who he was talking to: his friend Jesus, a friend so faithful that he could carry all of Joseph's pain and grief and burdens and then take him in his arms to find solace and comfort. Joseph knew this to be true, because when he wrote this hymn although he had already suffered much grief and sadness he had also experienced something even more profound - the friendship and care of Jesus.

Born in Ireland in 1820, as Joseph graduated from Trinity College Dublin the world must have appeared rosy, he was in love and ready to marry. But on the day before the planned wedding, his fiancée saddled a horse to come and see him, but just when they saw each other as she was crossing a bridge, the horse bucked and threw her into the river below. By the time Joseph reached her, she was already dead.

Heartbroken he emigrated to Canada but eventually fell in love again. He became engaged to marry Eliza, but sadly she fell ill and after three years of suffering, and after multiple postponements of their wedding, she too died. Crushed by this, Joseph never fell in love again and struggled for much of his remaining life with depression.

And yet in his grief and despair he found deep consolation in prayer. He wrote this hymn as a poem to comfort his concerned mother back in Ireland and it was only many years later that a friend found it in a drawer at Joseph's house and was deeply moved. And so, it was set to music and has become one of our most loved hymns and such an encouragement to millions of people to bring their grief, their trials, their temptations to Jesus in the privilege of prayer.

Listen to these hymn words: "Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer. Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer."

The heart of Christianity is a loving

relationship with God and at the heart of any relationship is communication, both speaking and listening. The heart of our communication with God is prayer.

There are many definitions of what prayer is, but one is that when you pray, you should open yourself up in such a way that sometime - perhaps not immediately, but at some point - you will be able to hear God say to you " I Love you".

Now I appreciate that may sound rather vague but in essence that is what a loving relationship is all about and, if we are honest, what all of us most want to hear and know - that we are loved, and in particular that we are loved by God.

The starting point is always that God knows us and despite knowing everything He still loves us. And because this is an absolute fact beyond question, we don't need to be timid but can approach him with confidence as his very special son or daughter.

Jesus himself said that when we pray we should call God "Father" or "Daddy". Therefore, we don't need special words, a special formal voice or to be in

a special place to talk to him. God just wants us to approach him as ourselves even with our funny ways, accents or words. We just need to be honest, natural and real.

And in being yourself, don't be afraid to express your feelings. Joseph encourages us to carry everything to God in prayer, and he reminds us that even though Jesus knows our every weakness we should still take it to the Lord in prayer.

This means when we pray we can lift up whatever is concerning us at that moment. If we are fearful we can be afraid before him. If we are bored, we should lift up our boredom to Him. If we are tired, we can tell him of our tiredness. If our minds are full of foolish fantasises, if we are feeling selfish, or angry, even if we are angry with God Himself, then we need not be afraid to let Him hear us verbalise what is going on in our hearts and minds. It's not as if he doesn't know it all already!

Listen to these hymn words: "Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care? Precious Saviour, still our refuge; take it to the Lord in prayer. Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the

Lord in prayer! In his arms he'll take and shield thee; thou wilt find a solace there."

Jesus invites us to come like little children to God, and one thing we all know is that little children don't tend to hide their feelings. I know God is more than capable of dealing with our emotions -- He just wants us to be transparent and talk to him honestly.

And so in all these things we can take them to Lord in prayer, and then leave them with Him. He has big arms and whatever we throw at Him, he will catch. Whatever we leave at his feet he will take from us.

That is particularly important during this pandemic when so many of us are fearful and anxious, sick or even grieving. We can take all of this to God and be assured that God loves us and longs for us to talk to Him however that comes out.

But sometimes it can be so hard it is difficult to put these things into words, sometimes all we can say is "help". Or do little more than just groan. And if that's the case, then that too is fine. It is enough. God knows and hears.

Many of us will also find comfort in more formal written prayers, and that too is wonderful as they will often be based on scripture and they can be really helpful when we don't quite know what to say, or when their words are familiar and comforting and we know they can help us approach God.

However, I would encourage you to not limit yourself to formal prayers, but also try to talk to God in your own voice and with your own words. You are a friend of God and when God becomes your friend you can talk with him just as you would to a friend.

The other important part of communication is listening, to create space in our day and in our prayers to just be quiet; to listen to what God might want to say to us. Let him work through our thoughts and our imagination to guide us, prod us, and encourage us and hear Him say, "I love you".

But whatever we do the one thing we should always try to do is to show up. Like all relationships, the more we invest, the closer we get. We need to persevere and to communicate with God regularly.

For all of us there will be times when prayer

comes easily, maybe in times of crisis, maybe in time of happiness and thankfulness but there will also be times when it's just plain hard work, when it feels we are just talking to the ceiling, when God feels a million miles away.

This is true for everyone; all of the great Christians tell of times in their lives when prayer just proved hard work. But those same people will also say the important thing was just to persevere and keep going, to cling on to the truth that, although you don't feel it, your relationship with God hasn't changed, He still loves you, He still hears you and He still delights in you coming to Him every day.

And I believe this is what Joseph Scriven found, he is honest in this hymn that he could be weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care, feeling lost and alone.

But he also knew that this was not the end, no matter what this world throws at us Jesus has promised that there is an eternal future that is real and assured and that there, in heaven, there will no longer be any struggles to pray, because there we shall see God face to face

All that will remain is love and relationship and that is why building that relationship now through prayer will protect, guide and support us every step of the journey through life and then for ever more. So, let's now sing again... what a friend we have in Jesus! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.

Prayer

Dear Abba Father,
Thank you for the incredible honour and privilege to be able to carry all our hopes, fears and questions to You in prayer.

Thank You that we can come just as we are, with all our imperfections. That no matter where we are emotionally or spiritually, You are constant -- You always love, You always listen, and You always delight in our prayers.

Please help us to prioritise spending

time with you: to talk and to listen.
Help us to persevere and to keep
showing up!

And I ask Lord that through our times
together in prayer, our love for You
will grow and we will know and
experience the reality
of Your love for us.

In the name of Jesus,
I pray , Amen

Week 45
What is Christmas all about?

On Christmas Eve in 1989, after our three young children were tucked up in bed, my wife Rosemary and I heard a clattering noise coming from our lounge room. I switched on the light in time to see a cloud of soot coming down the chimney.

This was soon followed by a baby brushtail possum tumbling onto the hearth. The terrified creature then scurried around the lounge room, looking for a way of escape and leaving a trail of tiny sooty footprints over the furniture and carpet.

While Rosemary barricaded its escape into the rest of the house to confine the sooty mess to the lounge room, I fetched a laundry basket to capture the little fellow and return him to our garden.

I might just mention that we had a family of brushtail possums living in a tree right up against our lounge room corner window and many evenings we

would pull back the curtains, sit in the lounge and watch them feeding outside, illuminated by the spill of light through the windows.

After chasing this sooty-black furry arrival around our lounge room for what seemed a very long time, we both suddenly remembered (at the same time, it seems) that the lounge room had a little-used door that led to the outside. All we had to do was open the door, which I did, and the possum baby scampered away to freedom.

We left the tell-tale footprints there overnight because the next morning at breakfast, with straight faces, we were able to tell our children that we had had a Christmas Eve visitor the night before who came down the chimney, stayed several minutes and then left via the side door. They didn't really believe us until we showed them the tiny footprints.

This reminds me of another story. This is a story that Max Lucado told in his book entitled ‘When Christ Comes’.

Lucado says, ‘When it comes to animals, our house is a zoo. I wonder if other folks have the strange

experiences we do. We had a bird enter through the chimney and get stuck in the bedroom. Another one knocked himself silly flying into a window. We forgot to feed a goldfish for a week – and it survived.... It seems that we have more than our share of animal episodes. In fact, sometimes I wonder if God send them our way so that I will have ample illustrations.'

'Such was my thought last week with Fred. Fred is one of the two hamsters under the domain of our nine-year-old daughter, Sara. She was letting him run up and down the piano keyboard. I don't know what Denalyn, my wife, would have thought about a hamster on her new piano, but she wasn't home. Besides, I was presiding over the affair in fine fatherly fashion, stretched out on the couch. The little fellow wasn't doing any harm – he seemed to be having fun. I know we were. Sara and I got a good giggle out of Fred's wind sprints. He brought new meaning to "tickling the ivories". '

'But after several dashes, all three of us were a bit tired. So Sara set Fred down [on the little shelf] where you place the sheet music. I closed my eyes and Sara, for just a moment, stepped away from the piano. Just a moment was all that Fred needed to get

into trouble.'

To understand what happened next, you need to know that their piano is a grand piano. Had the piano been of the upright sort, Fred would have been safe. Had the lid been closed, Fred would have been safe. But the lid was open and Sara was distracted and Max was dozing off and Fred decided to peer over the edge.

Lucado continues, 'I opened my eyes just in time to see him tumble into a pool of piano strings and hammers. Sara and I both sprang into action, but it was too late. Our little friend was not only inside the instrument; he was under the strings. We could see his furry back rubbing against the wires as he ran back and forth looking for a way to escape. Fred was trapped.'

'And we were stumped. How do you get a hamster out of a piano? We tried several approaches. We tried nudging him. Wedging our fingers between the wires, we tried to coax him towards the opening. Didn't work. He ran the opposite direction and disappeared into a corner. We couldn't see him. We held a lamp over the piano, and still could see him.

We tried flashlights and still couldn't see him. Coaxing didn't work.'

'So we tried calling him out of hiding. We used every voice possible. The voice of a search party: "Fred, can you hear us?". The voice of a friend: "Come on Fred, old buddy". The voice of a mother: "Freddie-boy, where are you?". Even the voice of a drill sergeant: "Fred. Get out.".

Nothing worked. Coaxing didn't work. Calling didn't work. So we came up with another idea. How about a little piano music? But that didn't work either.'

Only one alternative remained. They had to (gulp.) dismantle the piano. Some of us may not be intimidated by this task, but Lucado was.

He says, 'My hands are anything but handy. I have trouble opening a loaf of bread, much less opening a musical instrument. But Fred, the hamster, was in danger.... So I grabbed my trusty Phillips screwdriver and began looking for a place to start. But I couldn't find one.... The keyboard had no screws.... So, once again, we were trapped. All of us were trapped. Fred hadn't come up for air, and we

hadn't come up with a solution. All we could do was pray that he would survive the night, and call a piano tuner in the morning....'

He continues, 'After we had tried everything possible, I said jokingly to the girls, "Well, if one of us could become a hamster, we could go in and show Fred the way out". Of course, we couldn't even begin to do such a thing. '

'But can you imagine what it would be like if you could? Can you imagine becoming like Fred? Taking on a round belly, short legs, and whiskers? Leaving your great world for his cramped world? Why, we couldn't even imagine such an act. But God could – and God did. And the journey from human to hamster is nothing compared to the span between heaven and earth. God became a baby. He entered a world, not of piano strings and hammers, but a world of problems and heartaches...'

That's what God did for us on the first Christmas Day, around 2,000 years ago. What's Christmas all about. It's all about God, out of His love for us, becoming an ordinary human being like you and me.

The baby Jesus is a reminder to all of us of just how much God loves each one of us. God loves you and me so much that He was prepared to send His Son to be born as a human being to show us what He is like, in order to rescue us.

God the Son became a human being for us when Jesus Christ was born. What happened was much like Max Lucado 'wished' could happen with regard to him and the girls' hamster, Fred. Max wanted to turn himself into a hamster, like Fred, so that he could communicate with Fred, make himself "known" to Fred, and to rescue Fred.

That's what God did when, in the person of the Son, He was born as the baby Jesus. As the man Jesus, God lived among us, and made himself "known" to us. Through listening to Jesus, and watching him as we read the Gospels, we can find out how much God loves each one of us.

And not only does God make Himself "known" to us through His Son, Jesus, but also through Jesus he rescues us, unlike Max Lucado who only imagined that he could rescue Fred. Jesus did this by suffering and dying for us on a cross. There he took on himself

the blame and the punishment that we deserve for the things that we've done to hurt others.

On our own, our situation would be a lot like that of Fred the hamster or the sooty-black furry baby opossum: trapped. For us it is likely to be in whole mass of sinfulness, guilt, fear and shame. But the great news of Christmas is that God loves us so much that He sent His Son to rescue us. Jesus did this for us on the cross.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

We have to 'want' to be rescued, in order to actually 'be' rescued. Even if Max Lucado could have become a hamster, Max could not have rescued Fred the hamster if Fred didn't want to be rescued. Certainly the Christmas Eve opossum in our lounge room didn't appear to want to be rescued while he was fleeing the human with the laundry basket.

To be rescued, we have to be willing for the rescuer to rescue us.

So what happened in the end to Fred, the hamster? He allowed himself to be rescued.

He finally made his way back to the place where he fell in. He looked up. And when he did, Sara was there. He lifted his head just high enough so that she could reach in and life him out.

And what happened to the sooty opossum? The next night we saw him up in the tree, clean and happy with his family, feeding on monsterio delicio fruit.

My prayer for us all is that this Christmas and always, we will allow ourselves to be rescued, and go on allowing ourselves to be rescued in the future. The baby Jesus is a reminder to us of how much God loves each one of us: enough to become an ordinary human being for us to make Himself "known" to us and in order to rescue us.

Prayer

Away in a manger,
no crib for a bed,
the little Lord Jesus
lay down his sweet head.

And into our world
of trouble and strife,
the adult Lord Jesus
lay down his sweet life.

Thank You God for all
that you have done for as,
for all that you are doing
and for all that You plan to do.

And may the blessing of God
almighty, the Father, the Son,
and the Holy Spirit, be among us
and remain with us always.

Amen.

Week 50
Christmas Providence

Allow me to preface this devotional with the reading of Psalm 121

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.

He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand.

The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.

The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore." Amen.

The year was 1772. One of those almost impenetrable fogs had settled down over the city of London.

In a dismal flat in the heart of the crowded East End, a man stood gazing into the fireplace. Then suddenly, overcome by emotions of discouragement, gripped by fears that he could not name, he threw his cloak about him and walked resolutely toward the door. He turned the key and walked out into the night.

Carefully he groped his way across the pavement and felt for the iron horse's head and the ring of the hitching post. Then, guided by the curbstone, he made his way to the nearest corner, where he knew a horse-drawn cab was always waiting.

He opened its door and ordered the driver, "To the Thames, sir!" For in his deep depression there seemed no way out but to jump from the bridge.

It should have taken 15 minutes, but after an hour and a half of negotiating the dark and foggy streets they realized they were hopelessly lost. In desperation, he decided to walk and paid the driver his fare.

But as he alighted, his arm struck a familiar object. It was the iron horse's head of the hitching post that to him was so familiar. After an hour and a

half of fitful wandering he had alighted in front of his own home.

So impressed was he that he climbed the stairs to his flat, lighted the lamp, and knelt to ask God to forgive him for what he had thought to do. He learned that night something of the wonder of God's providence.

And then, there in that same room that had so lately overcome him with its gloom, the man, William Cowper, wrote these immortal words:

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm".

The Reader's Digest of December 1954 carried this example of the providence of God:

A young minister in America had been called to serve at an old church that at one time had been a magnificent edifice in a wealthy part of town.

Now the area was in a state of decline and the church was in bad shape. Nevertheless, the pastor and

his wife were thrilled with the church and believed they could restore it to its former magnificence.

When the minister took charge of the church early in October 1948, he and his wife immediately went to work painting, repairing and attempting to restore it. Their goal was to have the old edifice looking its best for Christmas Eve services.

Just two days before Christmas, however, a storm swept through the area, dumping more than an inch of rain. The roof of the old church sprung a leak just behind the altar. The plaster soaked up the water as if it were a sponge and then crumbled, leaving a gaping hole in the wall.

Dejected, the pastor and his wife looked at the defaced wall. There was obviously no chance to repair the damage before Christmas. Nearly three months of hard work had been washed way. Yet the young couple accepted the damage as God's will and set about cleaning up the damp debris.

It was a depressed minister and his wife who attended a benefit auction for the church youth group that afternoon. One of the items put of for bid was an

old gold-and-ivory-coloured lace tablecloth, nearly fifteen feet long.

Seized with an inspiration, the pastor was the high bidder at $6.50. His idea was to hang the orange cloth behind the altar to cover the ragged hole in the wall.

On the day before Christmas, snowflakes mingled with the howling wind. As the pastor unlocked the church doors, he noticed an older woman standing at the nearby bus stop. He knew the bus wouldn't be there for at least half-an-hour, so he invited her inside to keep warm.

She wasn't from the neighbourhood, she explained. She had been in the area to be interviewed for a job as a governess to the children of a well-known wealthy family. She had been a war refugee, her English was poor and she didn't get the job.

Head bowed in prayer, she sat in the pew near the back of the church. She paid no attention to the pastor, who was hanging the tablecloth across the unsightly hole. When the woman looked up and saw the cloth she rushed to the altar.

"It's mine!" she exclaimed. "It's my banquet cloth!"

Excitedly she told the surprised minister its history and even showed him her initials embroidered in one corner.

She and her husband had lived in Vienna, Austria, and had opposed the Nazis before the Second World War. They decided to flee to Switzerland, but her husband said they must go separately. She left first. Later she heard that he had died in a concentration camp.

Touched by her story, the minister insisted that she take the cloth. She thought about it for a moment but said no, she didn't need it any longer, and it did look pretty hanging behind the altar. Then she said good-bye and left.

In the candlelight of the Christmas Eve services, the tablecloth looked even more magnificent. The white lace seemed dazzling in the flickering light of the candles, and the golden threads woven through it were like the brilliant rays of a new dawn.

As members of the congregation left the church, they complimented the pastor on the services and on how beautiful the church looked.

One older gentlemen lingered, admiring the tablecloth, and as he was leaving he said to the minister:

"It's strange. Many years ago my wife — God rest her — and I owned such a tablecloth. She used it only on very special occasions. But we lived in Vienna then."

The night air was freezing, but the goose-bumps on the pastor's skin weren't caused by the weather. As calmly as he could, he told the man about the woman who had been to the church that very afternoon.

"Can it be," gasped the old man, tears streaming down his cheeks," that she is alive? How can I find her?"

The pastor remembered the name of the family who had interviewed the woman. With the trembling

old man at his side, he telephoned the family and learned her name and address.

In the pastor's old car they drove to her home on the other side of town. Together they knocked on her apartment door. When she opened it, the pastor witnessed the tearful, joyful and thrilling reunion of husband and wife.

Some people would call it an extremely lucky chance happening, the result of a hole in the church wall, an old tablecloth, a pastor's ingenuity in solving a problem and so on. But the combination of events was far too complex for it to have been merely "coincidence."

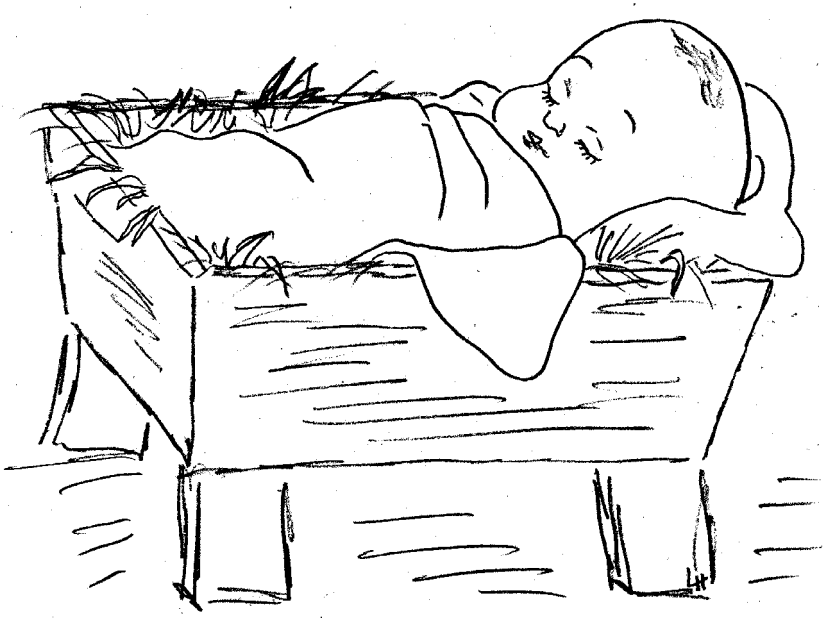
I would suggest that coincidence is when God chooses to be anonymous.

If one link in the fragile chain of events had been broken, the husband and wife might never have found each other. If the rain hadn't come, if the church roof hadn't leaked, if the pastor had decided not to go to the auction, if the woman hadn't been looking for a job or standing on that corner at just the right time...the list of ifs is virtually endless.

It was simply God's providence. And, as it has been said many times, He works in mysterious ways. Fifty-five times in the Bible are God's wonders mentioned. In Job 9:10, Job describes God's providence by saying that God "doeth great things past finding out; yea, and wonders without number."

And to close I will finish with a few more words from William Cowper's hymn,

'God moves in a mysterious way':
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.



Prayer

Lord, You do move in mysterious ways, Your wonders to perform.

And we trust You Lord to move in our lives according to Your will.

Thank You for the blessings of the past and we look forward to the way You will choose to rain down blessings on us in the future, whatever that may hold for us.

And we ask these blessings in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Amen.

Week 51
Possible Peace

There's a story about an old Jewish man who would get up at the break of dawn and go to the Western Wall in Jerusalem (also called "the Wailing Wall"), and he would pray fervently from morning to evening.

One day, a journalist from the London Times, who'd observed him do this day after day, asked him: "You come every day to the wall. How long have you done this and what are you praying for?"

The old man replied, "I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. I pray for peace and reconciliation among the people of this land who are so divided by hate and conflict."

The journalist was amazed. "How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things when so much conflict remains?" she asked.

The old man looked at her sadly. "Like I'm talking to a wall."

Every year, around the end of each year, we hear Scripture passages and sing beloved Christmas carols about "peace on earth and good will to men." We light may candles and sing "Silent Night, all is calm and all is bright." And it's beautiful, perhaps even nostalgic for so many of us.

But does it really make any difference? We look at the world around us and see all the unrest, violence, pain and brokenness. And we may well wonder, "Is peace really possible?"

Or you look at the deep divisions across our country, perhaps experienced them in your own communities, in your workplace and neighbourhoods, maybe even in your own family. Is peace really possible?

Of course, we need not look very far to see the signs of pain and brokenness. We look within ourselves, and we may find restlessness in our own hearts, the divisions within; we may feel the ache, the longing for something more, for our lives to be

well and whole. Is peace really possible?

We can pray for peace — within ourselves, our relationships, our nation and world. We can yearn for peace. But after a while, we may wonder if we're just talking to a wall. Is anyone listening?

Or as one peace advocate put it, it can feel like your banging your head against a wall; and if you're lucky, you might make a tiny crack. The walls that divide us are so strong...so strong.

You don't need me to tell you that the world is not the way it's supposed to be; you already know that. Our lives, our relationships, are not the way they're supposed to be. God has something else, something better, in mind.

It was on his mind in the beginning when he went about creating the world and everything in it. A vision for *shalom*, yes that's the word. It's Hebrew and it gets translated as "peace," but it means so much more than what we tend to think. So much more...

What does it mean? It means wholeness, flourishing and the interconnectedness of all things.

The way things are intended to be. It means a right relationship with God, a right relationship with others and a right relationship with all of creation.

But sin made a mess of things, disrupted this *shalom* and fractured relationships. And up went the walls. Walls all around us; walls between us; walls within us. Our own hearts divided.

But God refused to leave the world a mess, fractured and broken. God refused to have a world with so many walls, so many divisions.

So what does God do? God enters into the mess, the darkness and the brokenness. God comes to be with us among all the walls. God calls a people to be his covenant people; a light to the nations.

Sometimes we live into this calling; much of the time we don't. But God's intent is to pull the world back together, break down the walls, restore his shalom, his peace.

Isaiah prophesies about it. Isaiah 9:2 reads, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of

death, upon them hath the light shined."

Isaiah talks about a child who will be a light in the darkness. A Messiah, a Saviour, who will come to draw the world back together, draw people back to God, usher in God's *shalom*, God's peace for all people, for all the nations.

And now Isaiah 9:6-7, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this."

He has a name. Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, and Jesus, which means "God saves."

And he has a face. The scrunched up, pudgy face of an infant, so helpless and vulnerable, born into straw and poverty to a very young mother and

her fiancé.

And he is bringing another kingdom — the one Isaiah speaks of-in the line of Israel's greatest king (David) — a kingdom of peace, where righteousness and justice meet in *shalom*; in peace.

A peace that is not just the absence of conflict but the presence of justice, beauty, goodness and wholeness; in fact, God's very Spirit. A peace in which the walls come down, and we can finally be at peace with God-forgiven and put back in right relationship.

And we can experience peace with one another-overcome our divisions and move toward one another in love and understanding. And nations can beat their weapons into ploughshares and stop warring against each other.

This child brings this peace, makes this peace that seems impossible, possible.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth called this peace the "impossible possibility" — a God who is able to do what we, in our own striving and effort-cannot do.

Incidentally, Reinhold Niebuhr called God's love "the impossible possibility". And these both amount to the same thing.

This child Jesus who would grow up into a man, fully God and fully human, and who would lay down his life in a sacrifice of love. Only to bust forth from the tomb three days later and be crowned Lord of all. The impossible possibility. And now the world can really be different.

The apostle Paul declares it this way in Ephesians 2:13-18, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the [ceremonial] law with its [sacrificial] commandments and regulations."

"His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him

we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."

No wonder the angels sang out on that first Christmas day, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

No doubt you've heard the true story of the famous "Christmas Eve Truce" of 1914. For the younger generation, let me explain. Kaiser Wilhelm II had sent thousands of Christmas trees to the front lines in order to boost the morale of the German troops.

After the trees were set up over their trenches, in sight of the enemies' lines, a German soldier began to sing the beloved Christmas hymn "Stille Nacht" ("Silent Night").

His strong tenor voice pierces the cold, wintery night as enemy armies sit in their trenches gripping their rifles. *Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright. Round yon virgin, mother and child. Holy infant so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*

Soon the French and Scottish troops, huddled in their separate barracks, begin to sing along in their own languages.

Then something remarkable happens. Slowly, soldiers from all sides began to climb out of their trenches, without their weapons. They engage each other in conversation, exchange gifts, and then participate in a Christmas Eve worship service together, an impossible possibility that breaks through the political and military dividing walls of hostility, and unites these sworn enemies in joy and tears.

Through the child born in Bethlehem, a kingdom of peace has come. You are probably thinking, 'Where is it?'

This kingdom of peace is not yet in completion, so the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us to join God in this work of peace that He is doing in the world.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God (Matthew 5:9).

Let it begin with each of us. Let it begin within our own hearts. What is impossible for us is now made possible with God.

Prayer

Lord, Please give us courage and
wisdom to live in peace, and so
become an integral part of the
impossible possibility of creating a
different kind of world.

To a way of peace that is not only how
the world should be and can be, but
how it shall be when Christ returns
and the glory of the Lord
floods the earth made new.

And may the blessing of God:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
be upon us,
we pray in Jesus' Name,
Amen.

Week 52
Sleep in Heavenly Peace

Psalm 4 reads, “A psalm of David. Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer. How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord will hear when I call to him. In your anger do not sin. When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer right sacrifices and trust in the Lord. Many are asking, ‘Who can show us any good?’ Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord. You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety”.

William Shakespeare wrote, “Sleep . . . knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care”.

In 1818 Joseph Mohr wrote of the baby Jesus during a certain silent and holy night using these

words, *"Holy Infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace"*.

I usually sleep well. Within a few minutes of my head resting on the pillow, I'm sleeping. [At present I have two fractures in my spine and I choose not let my feelings keep me down during the day nor worry keep me up during the night.] Even when in great pain, I remember the words of an anonymous French writer who suggested, "If you can't sleep, don't count sheep, talk to the Shepherd."

However, many people have trouble sleeping. Researchers tell us that a new baby in the household typically results in between 400 and 750 hours of lost sleep for parents in the first year. Some have trouble sleeping because of pain or perhaps something has happened at work, in the family, or their life that keeps them awake thinking, anxious or worried.

Many are especially prone to lying awake if they have been falsely accused or attacked for no good reason, like King David in the psalm that I have just shared.

There's nothing like tension, stress, or worry

to keep a person sleepless during the night and restless during the day. We all will face those things that may cause the heartaches that can lead to anxiety. How we handle these events will dictate if we will be uptight in the daytime and upright in the night-time.

God wants us to get our rest! Psalm 127:1-2 reads, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat-- for he grants sleep to those he loves”.

There is a lovely Lutheran children's evening hymn in the German language that I would translate like this: "I am very tired. Now I am going to close my eyes. I know that You, my heavenly Father will keep Your's open and that You will watch over me." (Muede bin ich, geh zur Ruh, schliesse meine Aeuglein zu: Vater, lass die Augen dein ueber meinem Bette sein.)

John Oxenham wrote, “Thank God for sleep! And, when you cannot sleep, still thank him that you live to lie awake”.

Down through the years King David faced situations that could cause him to lose sleep. Psalm 3 was written when David was running from his son, Absalom, who had usurped his father's throne. Yet, David was able to sleep. We read about this in Psalm 3:1-5

Psalms 3:1-5, “O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him." But you are a shield around me, O Lord; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the Lord I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; [knowing] I [shall] wake again, because the Lord sustains me”.

We earlier read Psalm 4, that has a parallel theme to Psalm 3. Psalm 4 was written on a similar (or perhaps even the same) occasion when David was being slandered by his enemies. He was being falsely accused, persecuted verbally. Yet at the end of Psalm 4 David was able to say in verse 8, “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.”

How was David able to sleep in the midst of pain and trouble?

Firstly, **God was consulted** - Psalm 4:1 "Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer."

The first thing we should do when we have a problem is to consult our God.

David consulted his God, remembering that God had helped him in times past. One translation says, "You gave me room when I was in distress". Some of you may not like history, but it is good remember God's past deliverance. David was seeking God's mercy to calm his heart and God's ear to hear his prayer and calm his mind.

So God was consulted and secondly, **enemies were confronted** - Psalm 4:2-5

Have you ever talked to someone who couldn't hear you? David appears to be confronting his enemies from a distance during his time of meditation. By doing this he is helping himself to deal with the hurt and to make his own thinking clear. Also, what was true for his enemies was true for David as well.

Psalm 4:2 - An appeal – "How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?" In his meditation, David appeals to his enemies, asking how long they were going to turn glory into shame and how long they were going love vanity and seek after falsehood.

Psalm 4:3 – An assurance – "Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord will hear when I call to him." David knew that God set apart Godly men for Himself. Because David believed he was Godly, he was convinced that God would hear him.

Psalm 4:4-5 – We've had the appeal, seen the assurance and now we read the advice – "In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer right sacrifices and trust in the Lord." David advised his enemies to stand in awe in the fear of God, and to meditate or commune with their hearts.

The more a person respects God and thinks clearly, the more he will turn to God. David also advised his enemies to offer the right sacrifices,

meaning to get their priorities right, and to put their trust in the Lord.

God was consulted, enemies were confronted, and thirdly, **David was comforted** - Psalm 4:6-8

Psalm 4:6 – "Many are asking, 'Who can show us any good?' Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord."

Although many others were being negative, David called on the Lord to smile on him.

Psalm 4:7 – "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound."

David was joyful in the Lord even when times were bad.

Psalm 4:8 – "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."

David trusted the Lord; therefore he could sleep in heavenly peace.

Philippians 4:4-7 says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not

be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ".

A farmer advertised for men to work on his farm but received only one applicant, an eighteen-year-old boy who was asked, "Can you run a tractor?" "No, Sir," replied the youth. "Can you handle a milking machine?" "No, sir I've never worked with one."

After several more questions, all with negative answers, the farmer said, "Well, what can you do, young man?" And he answered, "I can sleep when the wind blows."

The farmer didn't understand, but neither did he press for an explanation. He needed help so badly that he gave the job to the young man. It was not many days afterward that a storm came up in the middle of the night. The wind began to blow, accompanied by thunder and lightning and rain.

The farmer was awakened and ran to the room

where the young man was sleeping. There, just as he had said, he was sleeping through the storm.

Rather than trying to waken the youth, the farmer himself ran out to the barn to check on the animals and the equipment. He found the doors to the barn tightly shut and bolted. The animals were in their shelters, properly secured. Then he remembered the pile of straw that the wind would be blowing in all directions, but he found it had been covered with canvas and tied down. Everything was secure.

On the way back to the house the farmer remembered what the young man had told him: "I can sleep when the wind blows." And he understood.

Do we have the confidence to live through life's storms knowing that we are secure with God? If so, we can sleep when the wind and other trouble blows and know that the “peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Jesus Christ”.

The official *US Marines Devotional Field Book for Military Chaplains* has an interesting prayer for those who have trouble sleeping, and we can pray a

portion of it as we close our devotional today.

Prayer

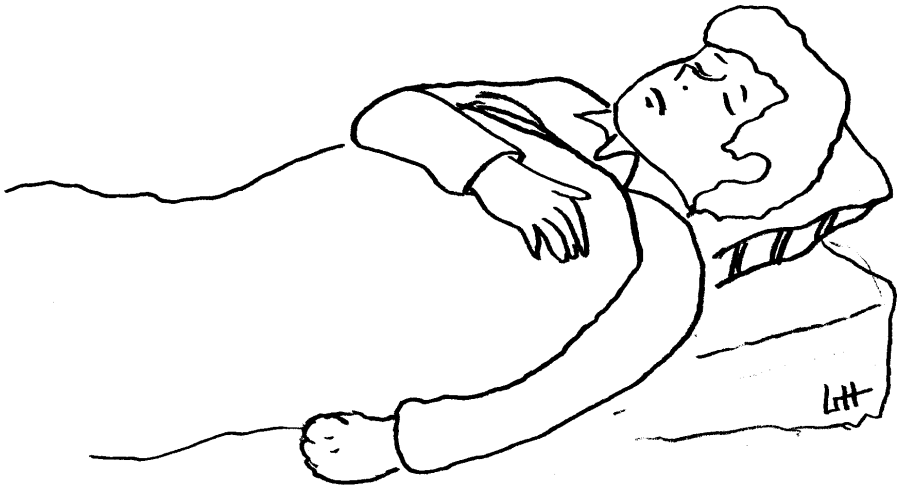
"Father, please hear the cries of my heart as I lie here still awake because my mind will not let me rest.… Going to sleep is one thing and staying asleep is something entirely different. Not getting the proper rest… day after day is taking its toll on me. Please help me God! For I have tried to deal with it, yet nothing that I have done seems to be working so that is why I am calling out to You for help."

"When I was little I heard that if you can't sleep, count sheep. Well… that doesn't seem to work. However, what will work is talking to the Shepherd of those sheep. At this moment, ease my mind, put those troubled thoughts to the side and make me lie down in green pastures beside those still waters. Comfort my troubled soul.

I put my trust in You and thank You in advance for energizing my body and refreshing my soul."

And now may the blessing
of God Almighty:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
continue to dwell with us in safety
and give us peace,

in Jesus' name, Amen.



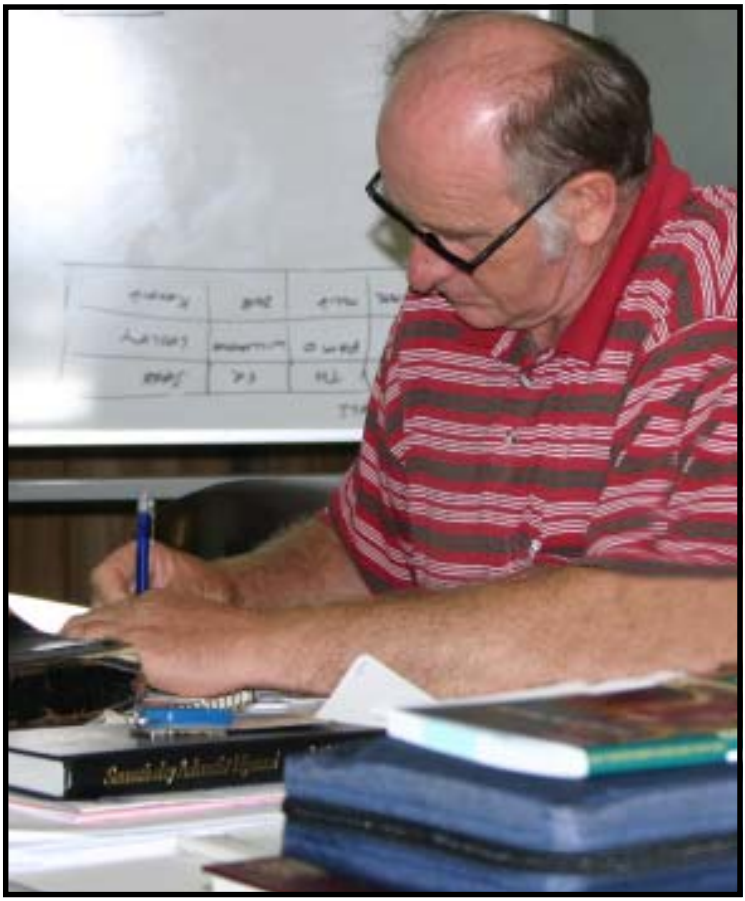
About the Author & Illustrator

Retired sociologist Lionel Hartley has earned qualifications in Business Administration, Business Law, Electronics, Economics and Accountancy, Graphic Art, IT and an honorary diploma in Dramatic Art. In the 1970s, he graduated as a Community Health Nurse with subsequent postgraduate qualifications in Psychiatric Nursing, Psychopædic Nursing, Nursing Administration and Nursing Nutrition.

He later graduated from the St Andrews Clinic under the late Dr Platts with a Certificate in Sex Therapy and Family Life Counselling. In 1980, he graduated from a Melbourne Theological Seminary with a Diploma of Religion.

In addition to a large number of other qualifications, Hartley later received his PhD in Sociology in 1989 and was conferred the honour of Academy Professor Emeritus in 1991.

He is perhaps best known as the author of over



100 books, co-author, editor, and/or illustrator of over 100 others and the author of scores of periodical articles, pamphlets and multimedia publications.

He spent over three decades as a family life counsellor and health & lifestyle educator, firstly for

the New Zealand Department of Health, but mostly in private practice (with an unashamed Christian bias) in New Zealand and Australia.

He authored and presented his first public seminar in 1965. As a practicing Christian he has been preaching in pulpits since 1960 for many different denominations and faith communities.

Although retired from counselling, Hartley is still very involved in campanology, writing, commercial art and public speaking engagements.

His hobby in his younger years was the building of reproduction barrel organs and the transposition of music into paper and electronic organ rolls.

Hartley is married to Rosemary (nee Wells) and they have three grown children plus a growing number of grandchildren.

(Profile provided by Theo B Hawkins [adapted])

Central London
Publishing